

**THE CHANGING FACE OF EROTICA: A STUDY OF EROTIC
LITERATURE IN THE WORKS OF HENRY MILLER, ANAÏS NIN AND
ERICA JONG**

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

ABSTRACT

For especially feminist critics, erotic literature depicts an area of human experience dominated by male principles. Until very recently, the rules of erotica dictated that men mostly produced and consumed it, and women played the props. Of course this implies that female subjectivity is constructed by the male gaze, and hence reified and commodified in terms of the male prerogative.

To challenge and overthrow 'male-perspective' erotic language and tradition, it has been argued that we need a woman's point of view, definition and description of sexual experience. To attack the phallocentrism of erotica, recent erotic novels have tried to create empowering scenarios for female sexuality in which the female characters are placed in positions of equal sexual power to the male.

The analyses of the erotic writing of Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin and Erica Jong in this thesis attempt to determine whether the texts discussed succeed in incorporating diverse styles and orientations of depicting the sexual to construct a new language for desire.

During much of his lifetime, Miller's writing was branded obscene, his voice too vulgar and his use of autobiography too egocentric. But critics also came to see his style and voice as revolutionary, and his use of the obscene and the irreverent as literary devices to awaken the reader from a wretched sterility of mind and body.

Many attempts have been made to explain what many critics have come to see as Miller's misogynist and patriarchal attitudes in his writing. Although Miller inventively portrayed a sense of people and of place, he seemed less successful at unravelling his attitudes toward sex and women. And so many reviewers do not see Miller playing an expansive role through his writing of the taboo by freeing us from our sexual neuroses, but find that the reader is abandoned within the limitation of a sexual mindset that is only named, not transformed.

The limited insight critics see in Miller's writing of the sexual has been ascribed partly to the fact that the sexual odyssey in literature has for centuries been a male prerogative in which the female's only role was to provide material for the fictions the male would create. But as is clear from Nin's and Jong's erotic writing, more and more female writers have taken on this journey, and have succeeded at least to some degree in giving their characters the power and freedom to reach a fundamentally female sexual awareness and position.

Great disagreement exists among critics over the literary value and importance of Nin's writing. Her work has been rejected as pointless explorations of erotic entanglements in which writing becomes nothing more than a solipsistic activity. On the other hand, it has been recognised as a new kind of writing of the female aesthetic which ignited the discourse around the issue of a genre of gender.

Nin's erotica mostly displays a woman's sensibility by using a woman's language and seeing the sexual experience from a woman's point of view. This implies that Nin treats her female sexual characters as subject-matter rather than object-matter as is generally the case in erotica from the male point of view.

Although opposing viewpoints exist of Nin's contribution to the development of a female voice in literature, Nin does seem to expand the boundaries imposed on the writing of the sexual woman by introducing a fluidity in her depiction of gender and of sex – especially through her erotic portrayal of the lesbian relationship and her candid writing of the ultimate taboo – the sexual relationship with her father.

While Miller's and Nin's lives were unavoidably entwined with their autobiographical writing, Erica Jong's writing – and by implication her life – was moulded into a media product, and it has become difficult to approach her work except through complex layers of reputation and stereotype. Although Jong's *Fear of Flying* almost immediately topped the best-seller lists upon publication, the sheer scale of the novel's sales led some critics to think of her work as 'popular culture' rather than 'literature'.

Jong's erotic writing has sparked similar criticisms to those lodged against Nin's, especially those which question whether Jong ever attempts to define her women characters away from a (dominant) male sexual partner. Although *Fear of Flying* was supposed to be a celebration of female sexual autonomy, feminist critics were troubled by what they saw as the female protagonist's ultimate affirmation of patriarchal standards of female conduct.

But despite the varied criticism of Jong's attempt to write an alternative narrative of the female body, some reviewers do see such a new story in her main female character's physical journey in that it coincides with the biological rhythms of her 28-day menstrual cycle. Jong is therefore seen to write into her text much more than a body that seeks and receives sexual gratification to become a body that tells a tale previously absent from American literature.

Yet the winds of social, political, economic and cultural change where the sexual is concerned have blown across Miller's, Nin's and Jong's erotic writing, so that the conflicts and challenges that occupied their sexual writing now seem to strike readers as very much dated. In this regard it is important to note how an increasingly 'me-orientated' culture and society – endlessly portrayed and exploited by the media – has forever altered the contemporary view of the sexual. And so the erotic in contemporary society has become ineluctably connected to the sexual value that the commercial gaze bestows.

OPSOMMING

Dit is veral feministiese kritici wat van mening is dat erotiese literatuur 'n faset van menslike ervaring uitbeeld wat deur manlike beginsels gedomineer word. Tot baie onlangs het die reëls vir erotika gedikteer dat dit meestal deur mans geproduseer en verbruik moes word en dat vroue bloot die vertoonstukke moes wees. Dit impliseer natuurlik dat vroulike subjektiwiteit deur die manlike siening gekonstrueer word en dus geobjektifiseer en gekommodifiseer word na aanleiding van die manlike prerogatief.

Om hierdie 'manlike perspektief' op erotiese taal en tradisies te kan uitdaag en te kan omverwerp is aangevoer dat 'n vrou se uitgangspunt, definisie en beskrywing van die seksuele ervaring benodig word. Om die fallosentrisme van erotika aan te val, het onlangse erotiese romans probeer om bemagtigende scenario's vir vroulike seksualiteit te skep waarin vroulike karakters in posisies van gelyke seksuele mag teenoor mans geplaas is.

Die analyses van die erotiese werke van Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin en Erica Jong in hierdie tesis is 'n poging om te bepaal of die tekste wat bespreek word daarin slaag om diverse style en oriëntasies van die voorstelling van die seksuele te inkorporeer om 'n nuwe taal vir begeerte te konstrueer.

Gedurende die grootste deel van sy leeftyd is die werke van Miller as obseen gebrandmerk. Sy stem is as te vulgêr en sy outobiografie as te egosentrië gerek. Maar kritici het ook tot die slotsom gekom dat sy styl en sy stem revolusionêr is, en dat hy die obscene en die oneerbiedige as literêre instrument gebruik het om die leser wakker te maak vanuit 'n armsalige steriliteit van gees en liggaam.

Vele pogings is aangewend om wat baie kritici gesien het as die misogynistiese en patriargale houding in Miller se skryfwerk te verduidelik. Alhoewel Miller vindingryk was om 'n gevoel van mense en van 'n spesifieke plek uit te beeld, het hy minder suksesvol geblyk te wees om sy houdings teenoor seks en vroue te ontrafel. Heelparty resensente is dus van mening dat Miller nie daarin geslaag het om in sy skryfwerk oor die taboes 'n verruimende rol te speel om ons van ons seksuele neuroses te bevry nie, maar dat die leser alleen gelaat word binne die beperkings van 'n seksuele sienswyse wat net genoem word, en nie getransformeer word nie.

Die beperkende insig van die seksuele wat kritici in Miller se werk waarneem, is deels toegeskryf aan die feit dat die seksuele swerftog in die letterkunde vir eeue lank 'n manlike prerogatief was waarin die vrou se enigste rol was om materiaal te verskaf vir die verhale wat die man sou skep. Maar soos duidelik is vanuit die erotiese werke van Nin en Jong, is meer en meer vroulike skrywers besig om hulle op hierdie weg te begewe en was hulle ten minste in 'n mate suksesvol daarin om aan hulle karakters die vermoë en die vryheid te gee om 'n fundamentele vroulike seksuele bewussyn en posisie te bereik.

Groot weerstand bestaan onder kritici teen die literêre waarde en belang van Nin se werk. Haar werk is afgemaak as sinnelose ontdekkingsvlugte van erotiese verwickelinge waarin die skryfaksie as sodanig niks meer is as 'n solipsistiese aktiwiteit nie. Aan die ander kant is dit herken as 'n nuwe manier om die vroulike estetiek te verwoord, wat die diskoers rondom die kwessie van 'n genre van geslag aangewakker het.

Nin se erotika vertoon meestal die fyngevoeligheid van die vrou deur gebruik te maak van die taal van vroue, en deur die seksuele ondervinding vanuit die vrou se oogpunt te sien. Dit impliseer dat Nin haar vroulike seksuele karakters as onderwerpe eerder as voorwerpe hanteer – anders as wat gewoonlik die geval in erotika vanuit die manlike gesigspunt is.

Alhoewel uiteenlopende gesigspunte oor die bydrae van Nin tot die ontwikkeling van die vroulike stem in die letterkunde bestaan, lyk dit tog asof Nin die grense verbreed het wat op skryfwerk oor die seksuele vrou geplaas is. Sy het vloeibaarheid in haar voorstelling van geslag en van seks bekendgestel – veral deur haar erotiese uitbeelding van die lesbiese verhouding en haar openhartige beskrywing van die uiterste taboe, naamlik die seksuele verhouding met haar vader.

Terwyl beide Miller en Nin se lewens onlosmaaklik verstrengel was in hulle outobiografiese skryfwerk, is die werke van Erica Jong – en by implikasie ook haar lewe – gegiet as ‘n mediaproduk, en dit het moeilik geword om haar werk sonder die komplekse lae van reputasie en stereotipe te benader. Alhoewel Jong se *Fear of Flying* feitlik met publikasie al reeds bo-aan die topverkoperslys was, het die fenomenale verkope van die boek daartoe gelei dat sommige kritici aan haar werk dink as ‘populêre kultuur’ eerder as ‘letterkunde’.

Jong se erotiese werk het soortgelyke kritiek as dié jeens Nin se werk op die hals gehaal, veral vir diegene wat bevraagteken het of Jong ooit ‘n poging aanwend om haar vroulike karakters te definieer verwyder van ‘n (dominante) manlike seksuele gesel. Alhoewel *Fear of Flying* veronderstel was om ‘n viering te wees van vroulike seksuele outonomie, was feministiese kritici bekommerd oor wat hulle gesien het as die vroulike protagonis se uiteindelijke bevestiging van die patriargale standarde van vroulike gedrag.

Maar ten spyte van die uiteenlopende kritiek op Jong se poging om ‘n alternatiewe narratief oor die vroulike liggaam te skryf, sien sommige resensente tog so ‘n nuwe storie in haar vroulike hoofkarakter se fisiese reis deurdat dit ooreenstem met die biologiese ritmes van haar 28-dag menstruele siklus. Daar word dus aangeneem dat Jong veel meer in haar teks inskryf as bloot ‘n lewende wese se soeke na en ontvang van seksuele gratifikasie om uiteindelik ‘n wese te word wat ‘n verhaal vertel wat voorheen afwesig was in die Amerikaanse letterkunde.

Die winde van sosiale, politiese, ekonomiese en kulturele veranderinge het egter, wat die seksuele betref, ook oor die erotiese werke van Miller, Nin en Jong gewaai, sodat die konflikte en uitdagings wat in hulle seksuele werke na vore gekom het deur vandag se lesers beslis as verouderd ervaar word. In hierdie verband is dit belangrik om daarop te let hoe ‘n toenemende ek-geörienteerde kultuur en samelewing – eindeloos voorgestel en uitgebuit deur die media – vir altyd die kontemporêre beeld van die seksuele verander het. En so het die erotiek in die kontemporêre samelewing onvermydelik gekoppel geraak aan die seksuele waarde wat die kommersiële uitkyk daaraan toegewys het.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Where is the eros [in literature]? It's in the forbidden and the unspoken. It's across boundaries and taboos. (Tennis, 2003: 2)

Because there are so many more questions than answers in the debates around erotica and its functions in, its impact on and its value for literature and the analysis of such literature, I want to ask some of these questions at the outset of this thesis. One of the most persistent questions around literature with an extensive focus on the sexual is whether a 'literate' variety of pornography, which one can call erotica, actually exists, or whether so-called erotica is always only a type of 'cleaned-up' version of pornography?

One way to look at the possible existence of a difference between erotica and pornography is to recognise the regulatory role that a complex set of overlapping disciplinary apparatuses, such as the law, the police and literary standards, plays in the categorisation of art with an explicit sexual content. But since the form and content of such parameters necessarily change over time, a rigid drawing of boundaries between the two has always been problematic. Any attempt to create a divide between the aesthetic and pornography, or segregate the licit from the illicit, could therefore be said to be doomed to failure. The paradox inherent in such a mutable divide is that this split is always already decided and yet undecidable, always already constructed and yet under construction.

A question that follows from this and which has elicited as vigorous debate is whether and how the functions of erotic literature and pornography differ? It is argued that graphically sexual depictions in art, whether visual art or literature, mainly exist to create what is called 'pornotopic' or 'erotopic' realities. With their multiple orgasms, these illusory or idealised worlds differ vastly from and are mostly irrelevant to what we generally perceive to be reality. Moreover, since pornography largely contains a succession of graphically represented sexual acts performed by faceless creatures seemingly driven by lust and nothing but lust – an emotion far removed from the complex set of feelings people face daily – it is said that there is no 'real' emotion and no 'real' people in pornography/erotica.

The counterargument, however, notes that this is exactly what gives pornography/erotica a vital value all of its own. Its purpose, according to this view, is to arouse lust, and there is no reason why this should be considered any less legitimate than the arousal of emotions and passions such as delight, anger, sorrow or compassion.

Moreover, it is said, pornography/erotica specifically resists the desire to make sex acceptable. It creates and represents the ultimate fantasy – pure sex, sex liberated from consequence into unalloyed ecstasy. And the subversive power associated with the pornography/erotica function lies exactly in the depiction of the 'unspeakable'.

Another line of reasoning also suggests that pornography/erotica has a value, but says it is a value that can only be expressed in monetary terms. Sex without consequence is precisely why such literature sells: sex that is cut loose from morality, from love, from pregnancy, from marriage, from jealousy, from hurt.

There is no doubt that sex is (still) big business, and the ways in which the sexual image has been assimilated into today's mainstream entertainment – television, film, music, sport – is an indication of the length to which such industries will go to sell their product. But it is also a sign of our society's obsession with a subject that is endlessly examined, valorised and portrayed, and yet never located or exhausted. In addition, besides the confessional of television talk shows, cinematic imagery, advertising and officially sanctioned explicit literature, erotica/pornography has recently adopted a new vehicle – multimedia. Could this herald the emergence of an innovative erotic text or has erotic content simply found a non-contact medium or site where the portrayal of the sexual would become even more mechanistic than much of contemporary erotic/pornographic literature?

In *A History of Sexuality: An Introduction: Volume I*, Michel Foucault states that we are simply enforcing a regime of alternative power achieved by an endless proliferation of talking and writing about sex (1990: 125). Does this mean that pornography/erotica is simply an expression of a cultural hegemony so totalising that pleasure has merely become an extension of power?

Talking about power brings us to the next questions: who or what defines the borders of erotic/pornographic literature, according to whose and what rules or criteria, and in what form do these rules still exist today? Why is censorship of certain literature deemed necessary? Does pornography/erotica threaten the stability of the social body and does censorship assist in preventing the undermining and unravelling of social discipline to bring about the desired stabilising effect?

It has been argued that pornography/erotica is the product of repressive social attitudes and policies, and that the unenlightened, irrational and prudish views of cultural or religious conservatives have forced sexuality into aberrant channels. By distorting, repressing and so ruining the natural beauty of human sexual expression, they say, we have been blinded to the real value of great art and literature because it is deemed 'obscene'.

When literature, however, started to bring sex more and more into the open, it sought, paradoxically, not to tell all but to sanitise or purify it. So with the ostensible liberalisation of sex, it was still insisted that some pleasures and voices remain in the dark, unspoken, unseen and confined as they were still regarded as belonging to the realm of the obscene. But because pleasure was now named – even though only in part – it was assumed that the liberated sexual voice would only express what was in the best interests of the moral order. As late as 1960, Montgomery Hyde, a passionate opponent of censorship and one of the first 'historians' of pornography, argued that the lifting of taboos would lead to the end of pornography and the celebration of the erotic: "Obscenity and pornography are ugly phantoms which will disappear in the morning light when we rehabilitate sex and eroticism" (1965: 21).

A question that flows from the censorship issue is whether there are differences between highly explicit descriptions of sexual activity in pornography and in erotica, who decides on these differences and on what basis?

It has been said that the pornographic/erotic text is nothing more than a narcissistic extension of the body, a text experienced as flesh, and a depiction of love deprived of all adornments, something which we then almost want to call a naked or nude text. But one could also argue that just as the physical sexual encounter incorporates or should incorporate much more than the mere deed, erotic literature is able to and should be allowed to depict the complex ways in which society endlessly constructs notions of sex, gender and the body.

D. H. Lawrence has said the point of pornography is to do dirt on sex (1985: 12). But does this attitude not presuppose that there is something 'dirty' about sex? Are there versions of erotica that do not contain what the 'moral majority' calls obscene language or explicit descriptions of sexual activity? An analysis of the depiction of the sexual in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* has been used extensively to address just this question. It is argued that the very brilliance of Nabokov's language, the sharpness of his wit and the artfulness of his treatment of the subject of paedophilia in *Lolita* – without reverting to explicit naming – shatters the taboo of the subject and so robs it of its horror, its implications of 'dirty' sex. On the other hand, it has also been pointed out that such a narrative admits something previously truly forbidden into public consciousness to seduce the reader into thinking the unthinkable.

A central enquiry of this thesis is the question whether male and female versions of and perspectives on erotica/pornography exist.

A main contention of some of the recent discourse around and analysis of the depiction of the sexual in literature is that pornography – and by implication erotica – facilitates the identification of the male with the dynamic and relegates the female to a purely functional role. The narrow range of these binaries – their repetitiousness and predictability – in turn produces the kind of mechanistic accounts of the sexual act typical of such a great percentage of pornographic texts. According to Susie Bright (1997), sexuality is unknowable apart from the cultural construction of gender. But recent feminist critical and imaginative writing has gone further than ever before to explore whether and if so, how, we can escape from the ultimate binaries of male and female.

For especially feminist critics, erotic literature depicts an area of human experience dominated by male principles. Until very recently – and perhaps still today – the rules of erotica/pornography dictated that men mostly produced it, men consumed it and women played the props. Of course this implies that female subjectivity is constructed by the male gaze, and hence reified, commodified and made moral or immoral in terms of the male prerogative. According to this view, erotica/pornography represents anxious men's 'will to know', or rather 'represent' female sexuality. Pornography thus constructs female pleasure as men need to see it. Such male erotic narratives are then also said to follow or closely

resemble the typical conventional temporal sequence of behaviour found in physical sexual interaction – flirting, foreplay, intercourse.

It has been said that D. H. Lawrence's theories about the dynamics of the sexual exchange sometimes celebrate the perfect polarisation or balance of (hetero)sexual roles, but as often project the male as the erotic power or initiative that transfigures the female. In his *Study of Thomas Hardy*, for example, Lawrence characterises one erotic encounter as follows:

“She is the unknown, the undiscovered, into which I plunge to discovery, losing myself”
(1985: 32).

As he expands this metaphor, he identifies the male sex adventure with the journey into the underworld, the harrowing of hell. In this scenario, the woman represents the “dark continent” whose exotic treasures the heroic crusader displays on his return to the light:

“For a man who dares to look upon, and to venture within the unknown of the female, losing himself, like... a man who enters a primeval, virgin forest, feels, when he returns, the utmost gladness of singing... the amazing joy of return from the adventure into the unknown, rich with addition to his soul... the inexhaustible riches lain under unknown skies over unknown seas” (1985: 36).

It seems that male erotica often refers to the adventurous colonisation of the weaker and less-established terrain of the female. Such erotic narratives configure a male act of appropriation, usurpation and possession that locate the female as the fascinating yet alien territory awaiting exploration and domination. Therefore a critique that has been lodged against other genres of literature in the past is also valid for erotica: women have in the past not been given much opportunity to tell their stories within male-dominated narratives. Here we can again refer to Nabokov's *Lolita*, where a heroine is created whose powers of direct testimony are virtually eclipsed and so silenced – first by her captor and secondly by her persecutor.

What are the images of desire then for our era? To challenge and overthrow ‘male-perspective’ erotic language and tradition, it has been argued that we need a woman's point of view, definition and description of sexual experience – a her-point-of-view climax. To attack the phallocentrism of pornography/erotica, contemporary writers of non-phallic erotic narratives have attempted to craft a body that seems ungendered or unisex, or otherwise completely eliminated the male gender from the narrative. (It is interesting to note how steeped we still are in the use of a traditionally male dialectic that even in our criticism of such narratives, we continue to use what can be seen as an aggressive masculine syntax – ‘challenge’, ‘overthrow’, ‘attack’, ‘eliminate’.)

Other recent erotic novels have tried to create empowering scenarios for female sexuality in which – although a conventional sexual interaction still takes place – the female characters are placed in positions of equal sexual power to the male.

Finally we should ask whether and how one can perform intelligent critique on erotic literature, or put differently, whether there has been and still is serious scholarly and academic interest in the analysis of erotic literature. It has been said that erotica suffers from an acute desire to be literary – a criticism used frequently in relation to especially Erica Jong's writing.

The analyses of the erotic writing of Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin and Erica Jong which follow attempt to answer, or at least examine, these questions further. Indeed, they aim to show that erotica, in contrast to pornography, is about writing more than about doing, that erotica can be a testimony to the sheer diversity of language, to the point that the same activities can be described in endlessly different ways. In erotica one should be able to observe a genuine pleasure of the text, a foreplay on words through which erotica functions as the erotics of language, not only of the body. What should be stressed is what Lennard Davis (1995) calls a divergence of text-sex through which erotica gives sexuality a human face as well as a body. This thesis then attempts to determine whether the texts discussed succeed in incorporating diverse styles and orientations of depicting the sexual to construct and reconstruct this moment in our sexual history as a new language of desire.

2 HENRY MILLER (1891-1980)

2.1 The environment and the writer

But, as I said somewhere, the human heart is indestructible. You only imagine it is broken. What really takes a beating is the spirit. But the spirit too is strong and, if one wishes, can be revived.

(Miller, 1974: 4)

During much of his lifetime, Henry Miller's writing was branded obscene, his voice too vulgar and his use of autobiography too egocentric. But critics also came to see his style and voice as revolutionary, and his use of the obscene and the irreverent as literary devices to awaken the reader as much a celebration of "having been ejected from the world like a cartridge" as a rebellion against the misery and futility of "the incalculably barren, immense frozen solitude of the million-footed mob" (Miller, 1961b: 119).

Through his writing, Miller performed a "non-stop oral autopsy on Western civilisation" (Gottesman, 1992:3). There was no intimacy or state of human existence – social, political, religious, commercial, artistic, sexual – that Miller did not explore and ruthlessly turn inside out. His recurring themes tell of suffering and loss – "there will be more calamities, more death more despair...the cancer of time is eating us away" – but also of the ultimate transformation through which a person with "no money, no resources, no hopes can be "the happiest man alive" (Miller, 1961a: 9).

The self-professed Brooklyn boy's period of prolific writing only started in his early forties when he went to Paris, although he had earlier quit his job at what he calls the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company in New York to become a writer. But as Erica Jong notes in *The Devil at Large: Erica Jong on Henry Miller*, Miller only found his voice in Paris where he felt vastly more free with its tolerance of all kinds of hangers-on and would-be artists.

She observes that "Paris in 1930 was utterly hospitable to the artist with no money", whereas New York in the twenties was a "decade of mad optimism about business" (Jong, 1993: 85) – even though the boom atmosphere of 1920s Paris was also coming to an end, with the Great Depression that would soon spread through America and Europe.

Miller bears out his sense of America as a prison house when in *Tropic of Cancer* the protagonist thinks of going back to New York:

"Immediately I think of New York I get frightened. I hate the thought of seeing...the automats, the dollars so hard to get, the swell cars... the efficient businessmen, the doll faces, the cheap movies, the grind, the noise, the dirt, the vacuity and sterility, the death of everything sensitive" (Miller, 1961a: 145).

To this day, Henry Miller lingers on in literature as a presence for which no common consensus seems to exist. But it is certain that he was one of the most distinctively opinionated and singularly identifiable authors of the twentieth century, and as such symbolises a force that has expanded well beyond his writing or his personality, intertwined as they were in his books and have become in the minds of his readers and critics.

2.2 Miller's work

2.2.1 The book versus the novel: Miller's personal testimony

I have endeavoured to restore life to literature.

(Miller, in *The Time of the Assassins*, as quoted in Jong, 1993: 37)

Specifically in his autobiographical 'confessions' – *Tropic of Cancer*, *Tropic of Capricorn* and *The Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy of *Sexus*, *Plexus* and *Nexus* – Miller attempted to present a blatant, unashamed, unembarrassed, startlingly truthful interpretation of his life and experiences in America and Europe.

In these works he uses as the main protagonist Henry Miller, and although his literary personas do change to some extent as he finds and develops his voice, this technique ineluctably fuses Miller the man and Miller the writer.

Miller himself acknowledges and underscores the effect of such autobiographical writing and its consequences in *Black Spring*: "For me the book is the man that I am... The confused man, the negligent man, the reckless man, the lusty, obscene, boisterous, thoughtful, scrupulous, diabolically truthful man that I am" (quoted in Jong, 1993: 37).

For many critics, Miller's use of the autobiographical was a revolutionary move away from conventional novelistic practice, which greatly influenced the way readers interpreted and responded to his work. By writing in the direct first-person voice and mainly in the present tense, Miller infused his books with a vitality and an immediacy that created for the reader not only an intense sense of being in the moment with the protagonist, but also the awareness Miller sought to produce that one's experience of these 'instants' truly counted – regardless of what might happen in a day's or even an hour's time.

This also meant that Miller consciously tried to move away from that tradition of literature that was self-consciously poetic or well crafted, towards a penetrating, unreservedly subjective, and in many instances unrevised, narrative that often comes across as if spilt onto the page in a torrent of frenzied writing. In *Tropic of Cancer* he refers to this intention by saying "a year ago, six months ago, I thought that I was an artist. I no longer think about it, I *am*. Everything that was literature has fallen away from me. There are no more books to be written, thank God" (1961a: 10). This objective is even more pronounced in some of the declarations Miller made as he prepared to write *Tropic of Cancer*:

“I start tomorrow with the Paris book: first person, uncensored, formless – fuck everything. The hell with... style, expression and all those pseudo-paramount things which beguile the critics. I want to get myself across this time – and direct as a knife thrust” (from Henry Miller’s letters to Emil Schnellock, as quoted in Gottesman, 1992: 9)

The writer Anaïs Nin – Miller’s literary critic, mentor, friend and lover during his Paris years – in her preface to his *Tropic of Cancer*, reiterates this position by stating that Miller, by “repudiat[ing] order and form and fiction itself... writes in the uncoordinated way we feel, on various levels at once” (1961a: 3-4). To further emphasise this stance she pointedly avoids calling this work a novel.

Although Nin’s autobiographical approach in her diaries and ‘continuous novels’ differs vastly from Miller’s, these two writers are in accord that the so-called realist novel’s need for plot, story, even characters, presents a too literal, clinical or superficial perspective, tells only a part of the story and gets in the way of portraying what they referred to as the internal life.

In an interview included in *Conversations with Henry Miller*, he says:

“I don’t like the realist writers at all... We are being cheated by them... just to describe our acts, our sexual life, our conflicts that are external, that’s nothing. There’s the inner force, which is so much more important. There’s no such thing as an objective view of things which is the truth. It is all coloured by one’s own vision” (Kersnowski and Hughes, 1994: 6).

This expansive style has elicited strong criticism, especially against Miller’s *The Rosy Crucifixion* – as against Nin’s diaries – with the imaginative writing of both described as rambling, repetitive explorations of sexual entanglements that trapped their specific stylistic traits into “a rigid mould of habit” (Jason, 1996: 10). Assessing Miller’s later works such as *The Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy, Jong also remarks that he seems to be “imitating himself, trying to repeat what had been so fresh, new and explosive in [Tropic of] *Cancer* and [Tropic of] *Capricorn*” (1993: 194).

But although Miller was never divorced from the content of his work, writing as he did of his own experience and allowing very much his individuality to speak for itself, some critics have observed that he did not simply “chronicle his own literal life, but selectively chose, caricatured and exaggerated certain episodes to serve as symbolic dramas”, and so transmuted the essence of his life’s experiences (Gottesman, 1992: 43).

Such imaginative amplifications were often strikingly successful in addressing what he viewed as the pertinent issues of his time: the social function of the creative personality, mystical experiences and the question of God; the confrontation of the sacred and profane and of meaning and meaninglessness; the liberating role of the artist; the dehumanising politics of the modern age; the spiritual value of marginal

characters and societal misfits – many of them the ‘homeless’ of his time – and meditations on the world-to-come (Couteau, 1988: 2).

George Wickes takes this analysis of Miller’s writing even further in noting that his literary ‘performance’ –although autobiographical in content – is highly self-conscious in design:

“Although Miller protests that he is writing the plain unvarnished truth, this gambit is the oldest in fiction. He is closer to fact than most novelists, but his method is theirs, his powerful imagination producing a metamorphosis as it colours and heightens the original circumstances” (Gottesman, 1992: 117).

Keith Berwick expands this notion by saying that Miller quite consciously and self-consciously created a persona in his work – the persona of the tough guy (DuBow, 1994: 132). Nin, perhaps the most astute critic of Miller’s writing, even today, observes that this is a protective persona, and even though she praises Miller as “a true fiction-maker, an artist of the imagination”, she also criticises him for not being interested in “getting behind [the persona], either in himself or in other people” (DuBow, 1994: 57).

This can be linked to Nin’s implication that her and Miller’s writing followed divergent paths, although both used autobiography as a starting point and had voiced the need to (re)create themselves through the writing of the self. For Nin, the main objective of her diaries was to stand as a story of growth and struggle towards liberalisation through self-knowledge. She believed that only through her (autobiographical) writing could she reach individual freedom by discovering an individual identity – something she sees Miller as avoiding or not quite reaching through his fictionalised self (DuBow, 1994: 28).

Therefore it is interesting that there is a great preoccupation in Nin’s diaries with finding out who the true Miller is:

“June recognised my acuity about Henry, the further reach of my understanding. I analysed his lack of knowledge of himself (the rest of his lack of understanding of the world). ... I aimed at his egocentricity, his over-assertion of himself in his books, the absence of core that makes him live... negatively. Self-knowledge is at the root of understanding and wisdom” (Nin, 1992: 38).

Jong takes this analysis of Miller’s presentation of Miller in his writing further, specifically when she examines Miller’s sexual persona. To his assertion that “a hero is primarily someone who has conquered his fears”, she perceptively responds that in the fictional character of Henry Miller, the real Henry Miller created “a fearless alter ego, one who never quailed at a cunt, never wilted, fainted or failed” (Jong, 1998: 116). However, because this sexual warrior so often reduces women to mere anatomy, Miller rarely succeeds in making any of his female characters ‘novelistically real’ to the reader. Especially in the portrayal of his second wife June, whom he almost obsessively attempts to write (out) in the *Tropics*

and *The Rosy Crucifixion* – in Nin’s words, Miller fails to “complete his recollection of the past June and the continuity of the present” (Nin, 1992: 45). So as a writer one could say Miller is essentially confined within the limiting ideology of sex from which the invented self is depicted as being liberated.

Kate Millett also notes this contradiction in her criticism of Miller’s compulsive chronicling of sexual experiences: what he saw as the mechanism to “liberate the self from social restraint and convention” to realise the “essential self” for her in his work becomes “a prison of obsession” (Gottesman, 1992: 11).

Berwick sums up these paradoxes inherent in the inseparable writings and lives of both Nin and Miller by saying that if Miller lived a life of fantasy, Nin lived a life of reality, yet his medium for writing is apparently reality and Nin’s apparently fantasy (DuBow, 1994: 133).

But to consider only the perceived contrasts and similarities between Miller’s (sexual) persona and Miller the writer would be to detract from the great impact his approach to and use of the autobiographical have made. His scenes of exaggerated, stark and even brutal sexuality often symbolised what he saw as the repulsiveness, meaninglessness and rapaciousness of the American culture which for him promoted fame, fortune, acquisition and possession, and so provided his reader with a critical, probing, and most importantly, fresh interpretation of life.

2.2.2 Sex and the writer: all body parts and anatomy?

All my books are entirely personal, subjective, biased, and prejudiced...I don't profess ever to be saying what is...only what I see, what I feel.
(Kersnowski and Hughes, 1994: 31)

Henry Miller arrived in Paris in 1930 from New York as a yet unpublished writer, although he had given up his job as employment manager to become a full-time writer some years back. *Tropic of Cancer* was published in 1934, and immediately hailed as a momentous event in the history of modern writing, “an extravagant and rhapsodic hymn to a world of unrivalled eroticism and freedom” (Gottesman, 1992: 23). But banned in the US as obscene because of its overtly sexual content, the book would not be released for publication in the UK and America for another thirty years. *Tropic of Capricorn* was published in Paris in 1939, and also promptly banned in the US for the same reason.

In both the *Tropics – Cancer*, which relates not only the significant events and sexual adventures, but also the small details of Miller’s daily Parisian life, and *Capricorn*, in which Miller recollects his youthful years in Brooklyn, his job at the ‘Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company’, his first loves and his riotous first sex experiences – Miller violently injects into the reader’s consciousness an image of a “world of personal and cultural dream and nightmare” (Gottesman, 1992: 4). His books at the same time function as a dire warning against all that deadens life and as an affirmation and celebration of how life can yet be lived – and is lived by Henry Miller. a steadfast worshipper of all the sources of fecundity, creativity and imagination.

Many attempts have been made to explain or understand what many critics – and especially feminist critics – have come to see as Miller’s misogynist and patriarchal attitudes in his writing. But one must be careful not to develop as simplistic an idiom in analysing the complexities that surround what has come to be viewed as the possibly intertwined stance of Miller the fictional persona and Miller the writer as the simplistic rhetoric of male supremacy.

Miller wants to jolt his reader into an awareness of what he sees as a continual degradation of Western civilisation into a wretched sterility of mind and body, with the accompanying fear of all human feeling, expression and interaction not isolated from abandon and regulated through restraint. One of the techniques he uses is to render the sexual experience unsanitised and demystified and thus appallingly real through explicit language and the squalid couplings such language relates.

In *Remember to Remember*, Miller makes this objective clear:

“When obscenity crops out in art, in literature more particularly, it usually functions as a technical device... its purpose is to awaken, to usher in a sense of reality” (1947:24).

Jong underscores Miller’s aim in *The Devil at Large: Erica Jong on Henry Miller* when she observes that, through his boastful, graphic sexual scenes in the *Tropics* and in *The Rosy Crucifixion*, Miller demystifies, denigrates and dirties sex to make it utterly devoid of meaning so that it comes to mirror Miller’s larger attempt at giving the reader a vivid image of a humanity of “dead certainty” and inertia, which is therefore also stripped of “illusion and myth and romanticism and idealism” (1993: 107). The two passages below from the *Tropics* portray these parallels Miller draws between the image of ‘dirty’ sexual encounters with prostitutes but which are still covertly practised and society’s outward portrayal of its ‘respectable’ achievements and prosperity, and the degradation, dullness and apathy inherent in such a social structure.

“The wallpaper with which the men of science have covered the world of reality is falling to tatters. The grand whorehouse they have made of life requires no decoration; it is essential only that the drains function adequately” (Miller, 1961a: 109).

“My people were entirely Nordic, which is to say idiots. Among them was a doctrine of cleanliness, to say nothing of righteousness. They were painfully clean, but inwardly they stank. Never once had they opened the door which leads to the soul... Everything was for tomorrow, but tomorrow never came. The present was only a bridge and on this bridge they are still groaning, as the world groans, and not one idiot ever thinks of blowing up the bridge” (Miller, 1961b: 11).

Indeed, Miller makes full use of indecent speech’s power to shock and outrage, which, as Michel Foucault observed in *A History of Sexuality: An Introduction: Volume I*, has been valorised and intensified to become “a counter-effect” to the “tightening up of the rules of decorum” (1990: 18).

“What is unmentionable is pure fuck and pure cunt: it must be mentioned only in deluxe editions, otherwise the world will fall apart. What holds the world together, as I have learned from bitter experience, is sexual intercourse. But fuck, the real thing, cunt, the real thing, seems to contain some unidentified element which is far more dangerous than nitroglycerin. To get a sense of the real thing, you must consult a Sears Roebuck catalogue endorsed by the Anglican Church... And so the Land of Fuck becomes ever more receding” (Miller, 1961b: 192, 194).

But Miller also uses the paradox of bringing the reader closer to what is written by repelling him to symbolise how utterly self-repulsive civilisation has become. For Miller the world is “a cancer eating away at itself” (1961a: 10), and he portrays this world as “an orgy of human self-alienation, a cesspool of it” in which he “rubs your nose”, says Jay Martin (Gottesman, 1992: 79).

Richard Ellman agrees with this viewpoint when he says Miller’s forceful move away from conventionally ‘approved’ language and content in the *Tropics* is an attempt to “break through the conventions of the novel and to establish a kind of history of the hero which will ultimately bring the readers – like the hero – from the state mentioned on the first page [of *Cancer*], where everyone feels dead, to the state mentioned on the last page, where the hero begins to feel alive, feels the river of life coursing through him...” (De Grazia, 1993: 376).

This large sense of emptiness that seems to envelop the world for Miller – a world that is, however, envisioned by most people as “the greatest jamboree of wealth and happiness” (Miller, 1961b: 12) – is borne out in *Tropic of Cancer* by the character Van Norden’s notion of the contradiction inherent in women’s sexual appeal, which he explains to the Miller persona thus:

“When you look at them with their clothes on you imagine all sorts of things; you give them an individuality like, which they haven’t got, of course. There’s just a crack there between the legs...All that mystery about sex and then you discover that it’s nothing, just a blank...there’s nothing there...nothing at all. It’s disgusting” (Miller, 1961a: 140).

On the other hand, the Miller persona never suffers from the same lack as Van Norden’s females. He is, in Millett’s words, “sexually irresistible and potent to an almost mystical degree” (1969: 8) so that he can – and does – take whatever woman comes his way.

“Now this is what is rather strange... A few minutes ago I thought of Rita... and when I got out of the train, whom should I bump into rounding a corner but Rita herself... And as though she has been informed telepathically of what was going on in my brain, Rita too was hot under the whiskers... I had a notion to bring her back to her own home, stand her up in the vestibule and give her a fuck right under Maxie’s nose – which I did... I thought she would go off her nut completely, the way she began to carry on. She must have had four or five orgasms like that in the air, before I put her feet down on the ground. If she had been

fucked before she had never been fucked properly, that's a cinch. And I myself was never in such a fine cool collected scientific frame of mind as now lying on the floor of the vestibule" (Miller, 1961b: 212-213).

This matter-of-fact taking of sex by the male protagonist and his depiction of the woman's almost automatic assimilation of his view of her as a readily available (sexual) article, as well as the inevitable translation of his state of arousal into a fantastical orgasmic condition on her part serve to underline the notion that male sex is a manifestation of male power.

Only the most basic apparatuses – tits, ass, cunt and prick – are needed for this man's-point-of-view sexual encounter and sexual satisfaction, says Millett (1969: 299). This power is all encompassing, eliminates or ignores the female as individual entity and as an erotic force in her own right, and even determines the start and end of her sexual pleasure.

"I just didn't give a fuck for her, as a person, thought I often wondered what she might be like as a piece of fuck, so to speak... Finally I had to pull it out and tell her to stop" (Miller, 1965: 178).

So Miller's women, or rather their sex organs – which are also the site of the main distinctions made between them – function solely as his tool of sexual pleasure, and so he is surprised when they display emotion: "Imagine that! Asking me if I loved her! I didn't even know her name. I never know their names" (Miller, 1961a: 107).

Such sexual attitudes are seen to be brusquely exploitative, self-inflated and egotistical, objectifying and commodifying, impersonal and depersonalising, hostile and contemptuous towards the female, and depict a mechanistic performance of the sex act of which Richard Hoggart says: "Miller's men are alone even when they are fornicating" (Gottesman, 1992: 165).

There are numerous examples in both the *Tropics* and *The Rosy Crucifixion* of the utterly detached but endlessly "descriptive, almost scientific gaze" that the Miller persona directs towards the women – or rather the cunts – that he fucks (Millett, 1969: 295).

"[Mara] wasn't any longer a woman in heat, she wasn't even a woman, she was just a mass of indefinable contours wriggling and squirming like a piece of fresh bait... I had long ceased to be interested in her contortions, except for the part of me that was in her I was as cool as a cucumber and remote as the Dog Star... Towards dawn, Eastern Standard Time, I saw by that frozen condensed-milk expression about the jaw that it was happening. ... With the last dying spark [her face] collapsed like a punctured bag, the eyes and nostrils smoking like toasted acorns in a slightly wrinkled lake of pale skin" (Miller, 1965: 143).

But what Millett calls "the point of Miller's game" – "to get as much [cunt] as you can while giving nothing" – (1969: 304), is for Miller also the point of the game played in a voracious and rapacious

America, with its “dirty white conquerors who have sullied the earth with [their] cloven hoofs, [their] instruments, [their] weapons, [their] germs...all who are sitting in clover and counting [their] coppers” (1961b: 33-34). This outlook is humorously described in yet another sexual adventure in which Miller gets the girl and the money:

“Her hat had rolled off into a corner and her handbag had spilled open and a few coins had tumbled out. I note this because just before I gave it to her good and proper I made a mental note to pocket a few coins for my carfare...” (Miller, 1961b: 213).

From another viewpoint, however, this demonstration of supreme male power could also be an attempt by Miller to symbolise the growing sense of his destiny and might as a writer who sees and is able to interpret the world from all angles. As Miller the sexual subjugator can give voice to both the male and the female’s experience of sexual pleasure, so Miller the writer can give voice to both the dream and the nightmare of society and the individual.

Apart from the fact that Millett vehemently criticises the male sexist world view of *Tropic of Cancer*, in *Sexual Politics* she does recognise Miller’s achievement in giving a “voice to the unutterable” – not by using four-letter words specifically, which have been printed in a variety of places already – but his articulation of “the disgust, the contempt, the hostility, the violence and the sense of filth” with which our culture, or more specifically, its “masculine sensibility, surrounds sexuality” and which “had never so explicitly and honestly been given literary expression before” (1969: 295-296).

But Millett disagrees with other critics that such literary expression is always necessarily a liberating force. Catherine Breillat, for example, says the use of a taboo in literature or film acts as an “area of transfiguration, it’s not something to be despised or disgusted by, [it] is a destruction in order to reconstruct” (Grant, 2000: 4). And Norman Mailer observes that since “Henry Miller’s milieu was incapable of experiencing sex without the power relation of sex” through his frank writing about the sexual, “he made what moves he could to extricate himself from a doomed relation to sex” (Critical essays, 133). Jong goes even further when she contends that, although Miller “looked at a woman’s vagina and saw a dead clam that he had to conquer”, we should be “tolerant of all kinds of unpleasant speech” rather than proscriptive “in order to get to where we want to be, which is a truly equal society” (1993: 148).

In contrast, Millett holds that Miller does not play an expansive role through his writing of the taboo to “free us from the affliction of our sexual neuroses” (1969: 305). Rather, the reader is abandoned within the limitation and stultification of a sexual mindset that is only named and recorded, not transformed.

While most other feminist critics commented on Miller’s depersonalisation of women from within an era that had begun to place greater emphasis on the analysis of such portrayal of sex and gender in literature, Nin already held him accountable for the way in which he had distorted and reduced women to bodies,

to “an aperture”, while they both were still finding and developing their literary voice in the 1930s (Stuhlmann, 1987: 143).

So Nin astutely told Miller:

“In *Tropic of Cancer* you were only a sex and a stomach... with each book you will create a complete man, and then you will be able to write about woman” (1992: 212).

Nin believed – as other critics after her and which is discussed later in this thesis – that Miller’s vulgarisation and diminution of women to anatomy through the Miller persona was partly done to “save [Miller the writer] in his work” (1999: 231). She ventures that his scathing, dismissive treatment of his female characters conceals a fear (in the writer) of female power and a “fear of the immediate, possibly tragic, personal relationship” (Stuhlmann, 1987: 307-8). The weakness for Nin in this novelistic technique was that Miller in the end failed in “writing well about women” (Stuhlmann, 1987: 311).

But Nin also recognised that Miller’s imaginative power caused his voyeuristic and caricatural gaze to fall upon men as it did on women, and that he often used a similarly contemptuous tone in his descriptions of his male characters. “Miller spared no one, male or female; every person he met became material” (1990, 23). While such parodying portraits mostly rendered Miller’s women sexual cartoon characters, Miller’s men are equated to physically and intellectually impaired individuals, lesser beings (animals or plants), and inanimate objects. Holly Hoffman sees this caricaturing as part of Miller’s extraordinary ability to expose the raw realities of the humanity he saw and experienced in himself and others, and holds it as one of his most important contributions to literature (1998: 3).

“I like Van Norden but I do not share his opinions of himself. I do not agree, for instance, that he is a philosopher, or a thinker. He is cunt-struck, that’s all. And he will never be a writer... It is the caricature of a man which Moldorf first presents. Thyroid eyes. Michelin lips. Voice like pea soup. However you look at him, it is always the same panorama: netsuke, snuffbox, ivory handle, chess piece, fan, temple motif. He has fermented so long now that he is amorphous. Vase without a rubber plant... His dilemma is that of a dwarf. With his pineal eye he sees his silhouette projected on a screen of incommensurable size. His voice, synchronised to the shadow of a pinhead, intoxicates him. He hears a roar where others hear only a squeak... When I see him trotting forward to greet me, his little paws are outstretched...” (Miller, 1961a: 13, 17).

This view also links up to what Jong calls Miller’s ability to create at times vastly different perspectives on the events in his life (1993: 56). For example, Miller on the one hand describes his time in his mother’s womb as his “first Paradise” on earth, where I fought to remain forever, but the forceps finally prevailed” (1961b: 23); on the other hand he says, “my mother had a clutching womb, she held me in her grip like an octopus, [and so] I came out under another configuration. Is it my fault that she held me inside her until the hour had passed?” (1961b: 12).

But although Miller inventively portrays his sense of people and of place, he seems less successful at unravelling his attitudes toward sex and women in his writing. In *“Conversations with Henry Miller*, he says: “people become uninteresting when they become like everyone else, which is what America does to everyone, try to make them like one another, do you know, like buttons in a button mould” (Kersnowski and Hughes, 1994: 37). Ironically, Miller’s reduction of women to body parts and anatomy, his cataloguing and differentiation of all women by their cunts, which nonetheless name them only as cunt, also cast them into a rigid form that the Miller persona specifies and sets, and which in the end blurs every female he encounters into all other females – as can be seen from the excerpts below.

“Vera, as I say, had a talking cunt, which was bad because its sole function seemed to be to talk one out of a fuck” (Miller, 1961b: 188)

“Germaine was different... It was not difficult to come to terms with her...In a few minutes we were in a five franc room on the Rue. Advancing toward me leisurely, she commenced rubbing her pussy affectionately, stroking it with her two hands, caressing it, patting it, patting it... the way she thrust that rosebush under my nose remains unforgettable...it was no longer just her private organ, but a treasure, a magic, potent treasure” (Miller, 1961a: 135).

“Sometimes I get so lost in my reveries that I can’t remember the name of the cunt or where I picked her up” (Miller, 1961a: 218).

Miller acknowledges, however, in an interview with Leon Lewis, also included in *Conversations with Henry Miller*, that his method for describing and analysing erotic experience was not always appropriate for one (as he claims he was) “vitaly interested in understanding the nature of feminine reality” (Lewis 45).

It is clear that Miller’s writing on the sexual makes for troublesome analysis. Similar to Miller’s telling “the same story from opposite points of view”, critics such as Nin and Jong seem to promote two different analytical perspectives of the use of sex in Miller’s writing. So although Jong on the one hand accuses Miller of “blatant sexism in his depiction of sexual seduction”, on the other she trims down her critique to describe Miller as merely being “the messenger expressing common male attitudes of his time” (1993: 56, 156).

She expands this argument by saying that, although Miller exhibits a masculinist attitude towards the sexual in his writing, the fact that he wrote with such “unparalleled honesty” about what he saw and what he felt, meant that he was able to “dementalise” fiction and so pioneered a new form of writing. In this fashion, Jong asserts, Miller contributed to a breakdown of the literary conventions of his time that “insisted on the well-mannered, the sentimental, the superficially pretty” in fiction (1993: 147-148).

In the same way Nin, who initially strongly criticised Miller for his vulgarisation of women, contends at a later stage that Miller has played a very useful role in the sexual revolution, and attacks the feminist movement for their labelling of Miller as a pornographer and a misogynist as a one-sided and limited view which rejects the “essence of what made his writing powerful” (DuBow, 1994: 52).

So when Millett in *Sexual Politics* categorises Miller as anti-woman, Nin retorts:

“A sexual obsession with women is not anti-woman. It is a limited vision, but not destructive. Attacking (Miller) for (his) limitations is what I consider a waste of energy” (DuBow, 1994: 73).

According to Nin, Miller – through his frank and at times brutal writing of the sexual act and the sexual body – also contributed to breaking down the canonisation of women and exposing the virgin/whore dichotomy as a myth.

“He had to get rid of his own distance from women which Puritanism created, so Miller brought that down by vulgarising woman and by taking her away from the myth – the Christian myth which they had put out there. One should recognise, at a certain moment, they [male writers like Miller who wrote about women in this fashion] were right. Now... we want to go beyond that and see the woman as a total being, not only as a sexual object. But the ones who came before... prepared the ground. Part of the demystifying of woman was necessary in American culture because women and men were very separate. Puritanism really separated them and promoted a lack of pleasure in the body and the senses, the development of the senses” (DuBow, 1994: 36).

But it seems that Nin is on dangerous ground when she develops this view into saying: “some women, like men, would rather be treated as sexual objects than canonised. Women don’t like being romanticised or idealised any more than they like being insulted or humiliated” (Nin in DuBow, 94). Nin here loses view of the fact that sexual objectification and Miller’s depiction of sexual seduction as an insidious form of contempt against women “can be just as damaging as open violence” (Hoffman, 1998: 1), since both is an attempt to silence the female by attacking her as an individual entity.

On the other hand, Nin seems to echo Millett’s perspective when she observes that Miller’s use of obscenity and violence to destroy the too-potent legendary element in the male’s attitude towards women and sex does not completely free him from exhibiting this very mind-set.

“It is like June saying she wanted to destroy Henry’s worshipful attitude the first night, and so she lifted her dress. I see the legendary aspect persisting, and I see in men the ultimate, eternal worship of illusion” (Nin, 1992b: 53).

Indeed, in *Incest* she sketches a strikingly similar picture of herself as ‘whore’ as Miller uses in *Tropic of Cancer* to depict Germaine and her ‘rosebush cunt’ – but makes it clear that this Miller is not the aloof,

male observer of his books but the offended male witness of a female sexuality named not by him but by the woman herself. And so she eloquently succeeds in turning the tables and showing up Miller's ambivalent attitude towards the sexual woman and so his failure to fully (sexually) liberate himself and his reader.

“How hurt Henry would be if I squatted over the bidet, if I held my pussy in my hands like a bouquet” (Nin, 1992b: 54).

Numerous attempts have been made to ascribe Miller's sexual attitude in his writing to the absence of motherly love in his childhood – which Miller also seems to use as some kind of a basis for his anger toward women as expressed through the Miller persona.

Of his mother, Miller notes that:

“She tried to scold and shame me into respectability. What she didn't realise was she was creating a very restless, angry person. When finally I had the courage to write about what I'd been storing up for years, it came pouring out in one long relentless tirade. Beginning with the earliest memories of my mother, I had saved up enough hatred, enough anger, to fill a hundred books” (Thiebaud, 1981: 2).

But this (partial) transference of blame onto the woman, or more precisely, the mother, can in itself be seen as a 'version' of the long-standing masculinist attempt to hold the female responsible for the contradictory 'sins' of lacking warmth – and can we say, by implication sexual feeling – and exuding too much warmth, or being too sexual.

According to Hoffman, Miller's inability to confront his mother was “translated into a passive aggression that affected [Miller's] relationships with other women” – and which came to be depicted as extreme sexual potency in the fictionalised Miller (1998: 4)

It is telling that Henry Miller battled to escape from his first two (sexual) relationships – initially with a woman much older than himself and then with his first wife. In *Tropic of Capricorn*, the Miller persona relates this failure to act by saying:

“Can't she hear me screaming it? I don't love you! Over and over I yell it, with lips tight, with hatred in my heart... with hopeless rage. But the words never leave my lips” (1961b: 338).

Nin notes that this “great passivity in action”, which at times rendered Miller incapable of “changing his surroundings” was the force that eventually made him “write violently, curse, and take whatever woman comes his way” (1992a: 152) – and so triumph over “woman, over the mother” (Gottesman, 1992: 4).

And so the pattern is established in the Miller persona's phenomenal aptitude for finding and seducing and fucking innumerable women and then “hit[ting] the street and walk[ing] away just as fast as my legs

would carry me” (Miller, 1961a: 220). Perhaps because Miller the writer was, or felt, smothered and consumed firstly by his mother and later by his wives and lovers, the fictional Miller can escape this perceived domination by women by portraying them as blank, void, only so much empty space.

“In the frantic grappling in the dark I sometimes forgot her name, what she looked like, who she was. At first I mistook it for passion, for the ecstasy produced by flesh rubbing against flesh. I thought I had found a living volcano, a female Vesuvius. But now I think of that black star gleaming through the hole in the ceiling, that fixed star which hung above our conjugal cell, more fixed, more remote than the absolute, and I know it was her, emptied of all that was properly herself: a dead black sun without aspect. I slid off the flesh rails into the endless space of sex, into the channel orbits established by this one and that one: Georgiana, for instance, of only a brief afternoon, Thelma, the Egyptian whore, Carlotta, Alannah, Una, Mona, Magda, bodies, thighs...” (Miller, 1961b: 239).

Susan Griffin does not hesitate to call this pornographic writing, which in *Pornography and Silence* she defines as “an expression not of human erotic feeling and desire, and not of a love of the life of the body, but a fear of bodily knowledge, and a desire to silence eros” (1981: 3). In Miller’s writing she says, the female becomes a “blank screen” onto which the (male) writer can “project the image he chooses”, and in this way the nature of her real being is erased (1981: 19).

“I don’t think I ever put my hand into such a juicy crotch in all my life. It was like paste running down her legs, and if there had been any billboards handy, I could have plastered up a dozen or more” (Miller, 1961a: 182).

Millett goes further when she observes that Miller’s attempt to “silence [women] into nothingness” and treating them as a “mere chattel for exchange” not only reflects anger and resentment towards the female but also fear of the female whom he can only deal with in the “utopian fantasies of his fucks” (1969: 312).

But it seems as if even this ‘method’ does not allow Miller to break away completely from the control, or power, the female (and the mother) seem to wield. Norman Mailer interestingly comments on the fact that the Miller of *The Rosy Crucifixion* continuously goes back to have sex with his first wife even though he has met and seemingly fell in love with June (the Mona or Mara of the *Tropics* and *The Rosy Crucifixion*) (Gottesman, 1992: 135). It seems that by being able to persuade his ex-wife, whom he describes as being prudish during their marriage, to have sex with him now, Miller negates the control of the indifferent woman she displayed during the marriage and affirms the sense that he has again gained power over her through his renewed sexual possession of and victory over her.

“Saturdays I usually quit work at noon, lunching either with Hymie Laubscher and Romero or with O’Rourke and O’Mara. Then, with dragging feet, I would wend my way over to Brooklyn to pay my weekly visit to Maude and the little one...Since the divorce

proceedings were only in the preliminary stages, since the rupture had not yet been definitely created by law, there was no telling what might happen in the meantime...It's a curious thing that a body, however familiar to sight and touch, can become eloquently mysterious once we feel that... it has become elusive or evasive. Her cunt still held a thrill...I was conscious of it now. [I should] only keep up the pretences and she would open those thighs of hers with a volcanic ardour..." (Miller, 1965: 216).

For Mailer it is as if "every man must have in addition to everything else a sexy statue – some embodiment of all the non-sexuality and anti-sexuality imbibed from all the cold and disinterested women of childhood, and yet succeed somehow in converting that cold marble to flesh sweet and happy at room temperature" (Gottesman, 1992: 135).

Millett detects a further compensation for his sense of powerlessness in his relationships with women in Miller's attempt to "establish his manhood as a literary legend" (1965: 34). Miller relishes telling of his sexual exploits to his male friends – and by implication the male reader becomes as much of an awed audience as the boon companions of his books.

"I went on to relate little episodes out of my telegraphic life: The crooks I had to deal with, the whores who try to muscle in, the nymphomaniacs. His mouth hung open like a hinge, his eyes were popping out of his head" (1965: 36).

Millett calls this a "cultural homosexuality which bestows all forms of companionship – love, friendship, affection – exclusively on males", while the mindless materiality inherent in Miller's "compulsive heterosexual activity" is kept for females (1969: 303).

The most attention given in Miller's writing to any distinct female personality is to the character of Mara or Mona, a representation of his second wife June, of whom he would write compulsively for more than 30 years. Only in the fictionalised June do we see Miller approaching some depth of analysis which goes beyond the cold, aggressive tallying up of the physical apparatuses applied and (ab)used.

"She seemed blue-black, white as chalk, ageless. There was not just the flow to and from, but the endless chute, the voluptuousness of restlessness. She was mercurial and at the same time of a savoury weight. She had the marmoreal stare of a fawn embedded in lava. The time has come, I thought, to wander back from the periphery. I made a move toward the centre, only to find the ground shifting from under my feet. I moved again out of the earth belt and behold, my hands were full of meteoric flowers. I reached for her with two flaming hands but she was more elusive than sand" (Miller, 1961b 136).

There is clearly an element of awe and wonder in this description of June, which eloquently traces her fantastical, changeful personality. This is also one of the few times that the Miller persona expresses the

need to know the essence of a woman, but he has to acknowledge with some agitation that he cannot quite capture her.

While Miller here develops June's character beyond her sexuality, at other times he also caricatures and delimits her by portraying her as a lying, self-centred nymphomaniac (Hoffman, 1998: 9)

"Blind to her own beauty, her own charm, her own personality, to say nothing of identity, she launched her full powers toward the fabrication of a mythical creature...whose charms neither man nor woman could resist...She had no need to remember her lies, her fictions – she had only to bear in mind her role. There was no lie too monstrous for her to utter... But in the pursuit of beauty, she soon forgot her quest entirely... She became so stunningly beautiful that at times she was frightening, at times positively uglier than the ugliest woman in the world" (Miller, 1961b: 238).

Nin theorises that Miller's fear but at the same time need of the female is most pronounced in his relationship with and depictions of June: "Henry distorted June because of his neurotic love of his mother and his hatred of her, his need and repudiation of woman" (1990b: 159)

And she records and affirms in her Diary what June herself says of Miller's fictionalised Mona and Mara characters: "He desires ugly, common women, passive women. He can't stand my strength" (1992b: 38), and later: "Henry always makes characters. He made one out of me" (Nin, 1992b: 159).

According to Jong, it is Nin in her diaries, not Miller in his autobiographical romances, as he calls them, who succeeds in capturing June, and portrays her more vividly and truthfully than Miller ever did (1993: 97). Indeed, Miller himself acknowledges this, as we see from Nin's *Incest*:

"I let him read all I had written about June. It is in this way I should have written about June, he says. The other is incomplete, superficial. You have got her" (1992: 131).

And at times indeed she has:

"But June's desire to see as a defeat, an injury, an event so deeply inevitable and deep rooted, is like Henry's desire to imagine a supremely cruel June: masochism – the latent desire to suffer, to be humiliated; the obsession with the wound one most fears, as June fears cruelty, abandon. This deep, terrible fear is now materialised by her desire of it. She has achieved probably the greatest of her self-lacerations, while I achieved the greatest conquering of the selfsame fear. I am now beyond fear, and anxious over June, anxious for her, whose torments are like ghosts of mine. My little June...you punish yourself, you punish yourself by destroying the love you most wanted" (Nin, 1992b: 38).

Mailer gives as eloquent an analysis of the mysteries of Miller's relationship with June, who according to Mailer was more unfixed than Miller himself, as Nin does above.

“It is a relation which proves obsessive but consistently changeable; fixed in compulsion yet stripped of roots; emotional as blood and yet as insecure as emotion itself... If ever there is an inner movement in his life, it is here...this woman’s maddening lack of centre leads him into an intuition of his own lack of identity... [a recognition that] there may not be a geological fundament in the psyche one can call identity. Like June, he will have to re-create himself each morning...” (Gottesman, 1992: 137).

This development in Miller’s discovery of the flux of his own identity is again mirrored in another vivid depiction of the maddening paradoxes inherent in June’s personality in *Tropic of Capricorn*. Here the reader once more notices Miller’s struggle to come to terms with June’s elusive self, which is indefinable because of its vastness but at the same time its vagueness. It is ironic in terms of the ways in which Miller imperially ‘pins down’ and assigns the overarching ‘name’ of sexual object to women in his writing that June here seems to be able to locate Miller whereas he is unable yet to delineate either her identity or his own.

“How had she come to expand thus beyond all grip of consciousness? By what monstrous law had she spread herself thus over all the face of the world, revealing everything yet concealing herself? She was hidden in the face of the sun, like the moon in eclipse. She was mirror which had lost its quicksilver, the mirror which yields both the image and the horror. I heard her dreams mumbled in lost tongues, the stifled screams reverberating. In the minute crevices... I heard her utter my own name which I had not yet uttered” (Miller, 1961b: 137).

This failure to reveal the women he cannot easily reduce to measurable body parts and so ‘control’ in his writing is also exhibited in Miller portrayal of Hoki, the Japanese piano bar entertainer he met and fell in love with late in life, in *Insomnia or The Devil at Large*.

“Of what ingredients was she made, I often asked myself. And every day, I gave a different answer. Sometimes I explained her by race, background, heredity, by the war, poverty, lack of vitamins, lack of love, anything and everything I could think of. But it never added up. She was, so to speak, an ‘insolite’. And why did I have to pin her down, like a butterfly? Wasn’t it enough that she was herself? No! It wasn’t. She had to be something more, or less. She had to be graspable, understandable” (Miller, 1974: 7-8).

In *Critical Essays on Henry Miller*, Ronald Gottesman recounts an insightful observation Lawrence Durrell made about Miller’s attitude towards women and sex in his writing. According to him, Miller’s best portrait of himself is provided by no less than one of the woman characters the Miller persona discounts through his sexual bravado. In *Sexus of the Rosy Crucifixion*, Sylvia says:

“Because the woman can never give you what you want you make yourself out to be a martyr. You have all the feminine virtues but you are ashamed to acknowledge them to

yourself. You will always be trying to dominate yourself, the woman you love will only be an instrument for you to practice on” (1965: 18).

This idea that Miller suppressed the female in himself was also voiced by Nin, who said that Miller left out of his writing all that was poetic and only put in the violence:

“He is romantic about women, yet he rises in the morning and writes his friend Emil Schnellock that what occupies him most of the time is taking his pants down” (Nin, 1992b: 85).

The limited insight critics see in Miller’s writing of the sexual Jong partly ascribes to the fact that the sexual odyssey in literature has for centuries been “a male prerogative” in which the female’s only role was to provide material, data, for the fictions the male would create (1993: 42). But as we will see in the analysis of Nin’s and Jong’s erotic writing, more and more female writers have taken on this journey, and have succeeded to a more or lesser degree in giving their characters the power, freedom and capacity to reach a sexual awareness and position that are fundamentally female.

2.2.3 Miller and censorship: America’s love-hate relationship with sexuality

This is how things stood on the first day of sexual intercourse in the old Hellenistic world. Since then things have changed a great deal. It is no longer polite to sing through your weenie...All this is scatological, eschatological and ecumenical.

(Miller, 1961b: 194)

In his account of a number of court cases against claims of obscenity in literature in the 1960s, Edward De Grazia holds that Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn* represented “a new and critical phase in the continuing struggle over censorship of sex in literature” (1992: 374).

Initially, the test for obscenity was based on whether the material in question had “a tendency to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences”. But literature’s “capacity to arouse lust in the average person” was later added to this definition, and was the prevailing American legal test of whether literature ought to be suppressed for being obscene when Miller’s writing came to trial. (1992: i-ii).

From the initial rulings of various courts against Miller’s books (which were eventually overturned by the Appeals Court), it is clear that the frank depictions (and positions) of sexual acts and the sexual body – and the language Miller uses to describe sex in the *Tropics* – aroused a great fear that the country’s deeply entrenched political, social and religious values would be subverted or even destroyed.

For example, in the case of *Besig v. United States* the court ruled that:

“Each of the *Tropics* is written in the composite style of a novel-autobiography, and the author as a character in the books carries the reader as though he himself is living in

disgrace, degradation, poverty, mean crime, and prostitution of mind and body. The vehicle of description is the unprintable word of the debased and morally bankrupt. Practically everything the world loosely regards as sin is detailed in the vivid, lurid, salacious language of smut, prostitution, and dirt. And all of it is related without the slightest expressed idea of its abandon” (1992: 400).

As we have seen earlier, it was exactly such conventional morality that Miller found so stifling – but the use of highly valorised sexual images and language was only one of the techniques employed to portray what he saw as the spiritual death of the society he found himself in.

The courts, however, focused on the accounts of sexual activity described in the *Tropics*, and so found that these fragments – “worthless expression that could be deemed obscene” – represented the whole of the book. Thus, in 1964 the Court of New York ruled that *Tropic of Cancer* is nothing more than a “compilation of a series of sordid narrations” dealing with sex in a manner “designed to appeal to the prurient interests of the average person”. And so the court deemed Miller’s novel to be “hard-core pornography, dirt for dirt’s sake and dirt for money’s sake” (1992: 377, 381-382).

Fortunately, in the same year, Justice William J Brennan recognised the paradox inherent in the court’s efforts to “define [in legalistic terms] what in a literary or artistic context was really undefinable – the obscene” (1992: 456). His introduction of a rule that would widely protect the freedom of expression in literature and art set in motion the unbanning of Miller’s books across the US

Still, the challenge to free expression through the location of obscenity in literature – specifically in the portrayal of female sexuality – continued to arise in America.

In 1986, radical feminists Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin drafted a definition of pornography that they wanted promoted into legislation as “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or words”, if it showed them enjoying “pain or humiliation” or “in positions of servility or submission or display” (1992: 614).

Although it is evident, says Richard Posner, that the feminist movement wants the obscene to be considered as less a matter of excessive frankness in the portrayal of sex than as a point of view harmful to women, Holly Hughes contends that “a lot of feminists today feel that there is no way to depict woman’s sexuality – be it gay or straight – [in literature] without its being exploitative” (1992: 615).

It is clear that McKinnon’s and Dworkin’s point of departure is flawed. Judge Frank Easterbrook calls it thought control through which a group of people aims to establish an “approved view of women, or how they may react to sexual encounters, and how the sexes may relate to each other” (1992: 611).

So to define graphic sexually explicit speech as pornography or not depending on the author’s or the reader’s perspective again places the focus on only a part of the literary or artistic work’s intentions, and so ignores the value or absence of value in the work when taken as a whole. Easterbrook makes it clear

that a definition that allows “speech that portrays women in positions of [sexual] equality, no matter how graphic the sexual content” but forbids speech that “subordinates women” is untenable as an obviously contradictory description of obscenity and pornography. (De Grazia, 617).

Finally, Hughes rightly argues that to seize control of what may be said and read in terms of the sexual, limits and indeed makes us lose the ability to “put out alternative [sexual] images” and so “push the limits” of the portrayal of the sexual further (1992:616).

3 ANAÏS NIN (1903 – 1977)

3.1 The environment and the writer

You are a child without a father, just as I was a child without a father. Inside of this woman there is still a child without a father...there is the ghost of a little girl forever wailing inside, bewailing the loss of a father.

(Nin, 1992b: 373)

Great opposition exists among critics over the literary value and importance of Anaïs Nin's writing – particularly her Diary, which became her main work, but also what she referred to as her fictions. As with Miller, Nin's work has been rejected as pointless explorations of erotic entanglements in which writing becomes nothing more than a solipsistic, self-perpetuating activity. On the other hand, it has been recognised as a new kind of writing of the female aesthetic which ignited the discourse around the issue of a genre of gender (Jason, 1996:46).

Called by some the 'Madonna of the Clitoris', Nin spent a lifetime trying to portray and resolve through her writing the conflicts of woman in society and her struggle to develop on her own terms, find her own significance and express her own sexual experience separate from the male's interpretation of the female. Most importantly, Nin desired to establish a distinctively feminine language to discover and articulate her feelings and perceptions, and so encourage other women to do the same.

Nin was born in France of Spanish-Cuban parentage. When she was 11 years old, Nin's father left his wife and family for another woman – an event that would haunt Nin's life and her writing for years to come. Shortly after, the family moved to the United States, and on board the ship Nin started writing her Diary – initially a letter to her father about their journey to try to persuade him to rejoin the family – that only sixty years later would be published in full as a voluminous chronicle of her life.

From the abundance of material in the Dairy, Nin for some time extracted characters, situations and events for what she called her "conscious work" – stories and novels – and so, like Miller and as we will come to see, Erica Jong, created a fiction of her life. This gave Nin some public recognition as an artist. But she increasingly turned to the Diary, where her writing could flow "freely and unselfconsciously" as the more expressive medium (Stuhlmann, 1987: vii). However, Nin would not have the 'unexpurgated' Diary released for publication until after the deaths of Hugh Guiler and Henry Miller, who were integrally connected to her life and the contents of the Diary. Although parts of her Diary were published in expurgated form in the 1950s, much of Nin's personal life – and so unfortunately her exceptional ability to describe deep emotions – had been edited out.

Nin initially printed and published her fictional works herself. Her first commercial publisher was aghast when she wanted to publish *Ladders to Fire* but said that other novels would follow on this one in which

she would “round out the characters”. This novel that “threatened to continue” was an alien and ill-received concept (DuBow, 1994: 215). The continuity Nin envisaged was also not a linear progression, because there are no fixed beginnings and ends in her writing, and so her expectation that readers and critics would make the link between characters and events and the emotive meaning and significance of these, was not often met.

Having moved back to the US in the 1940s, Nin started to write erotic stories at a dollar a page for a wealthy patron in Oklahoma – ostensibly to supplement her income. Ironically, Miller – who had come to be known as a maker of ‘cunt portraits’ because of his frankly sexual writing in *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn* and who had also returned to America by this time – also sent typescripts of erotic writing to Nin’s agent, but abandoned the effort because he “struggled to leave the poetry out of his writing” (Stuhlmann, 1987, 296).

Nin’s erotica was published as *The Delta of Venus* and *Little Birds* in the late 1970s. In her preface to *Little Birds*, Nin declared such undivided focus on the erotic “unnatural”, saying that “to include eroticism in a novel or a story is like life itself, natural and sincere”, whereas erotica for erotica’s sake becomes “something like the life of the prostitute, an abnormal activity” (1990c: 7).

But although Nin says that she had to put aside her “real writing” for her “adventures in the world of prostitution” – by which she suggests as much the nature of erotica-on-demand as she does its content – she does not detract from its literary power or validity. On the contrary, Nin asserts that she experienced great difficulty in her attempt to give an authentic voice to the complexities of the sexual life, which, like all of Nin’s writing, is “enveloped in many layers, like a veiled woman, half dreamed” (1990c: 9).

As a diarist, eroticist and feminist icon, Nin was heralded by the emerging women’s movement of the 1970s. Erica Jong declared that no writer has told the story of woman’s sexuality more honestly than Nin, thereby breaking the stranglehold of patriarchal attitudes which prohibited woman from revealing and reviewing her sexual life candidly (1998: 181).

But Nin would always claim that she was never interested in becoming involved in the collective energy of feminism, which often virulently accused men of being responsible for the unequal societal, political and economic positions women found themselves in. Instead, Nin averred that her greatest aim in her writing was to “encourage women toward individual change” and said that she never believed in the destruction that resulted from “waging war on men”. (DuBow, 1994: xiii)

3.2 Nin's work

3.2.1 Diary versus the novel: the confessional writer

My diaries make people want to live.

(Nin, 1990b: 178)

Like Miller's, Nin's life was inextricably linked to her writing. But whereas Miller transformed the autobiographical elements in his work through the creation of the Miller persona and his exaggerated sexual exploits, as well as through the distorted portrayal of many of his characters in an attempt to denote – among other things – the dehumanising politics of his age, Nin's autobiographical writing in the Diary is very much a continuous and specific pursuit of her own and others' "emotional present" (Stuhlmann, 1987, viii).

According to Nin, the reader of the Diary has a strong experience that her characters are living because of her emphasis on an immediate reaction to and description of people. "I am a camera, I am a recorder, I am an eye", Nin says, to emphasise that the Diary creates an "instant truth" from the encounter that memory – which for her misshapes and misinterprets because one tends to express the past from one's viewpoint of the present – cannot (DuBow, 1994:147).

"I really felt that memory interfered with, intercepted and distorted experience over time. In other words, that everything was rearranged and reordained in terms of what we are today" (DuBow, 1994: 20).

But this presentation by the writer of herself and others as a 'living text' through the medium of the Diary by implication also involves a constant change of perspective and perception. With each movement of the eye, a different image enters – which Nin minutely records.

So she says in the Diary: "I look at Henry with blazing eyes and at June with exaltation", but later this picture is revised: "Pitilessly, I saw them", and yet again adjusted: "Yet I was drunk. And June's eyes were still burning, and her strong white neck was still white" (Nin, 1992b: 10, 19, 48).

Nin sees this 'undecidedness' as essential to the creation and expression of the inner life of the character, which descriptions of the external aspects of existence and character often fail to render fully because they are at most "depictions of impersonations" (Jason, 1996: 21).

"I wanted to see the development of life and growth in terms of continuous evolutions, noting down all its transformations. D.H. Lawrence once said the greatest problem of fiction was how to transport the living essence, the living quality of experience, into a prearranged art form. And in this dangerous transposition, this carrying of experience into fiction, the danger was that it would die in the process. Now in the diary no such death takes place because there is no distance. The living moment is caught. And in catching it,

by accumulation and by accretion, a personality emerges in all its ambivalences, contradictions and paradoxes, and finally, in its most living form” (DuBow, 1994: 22).

This technique has been harshly criticised as creating a dull, repetitive narrative, and the user of such a method is deemed so self-absorbed that she cannot look beyond the limits of her inner world for content. According to Baldanza, Nin practises the act of “self-communion” through her diaries, an activity that “reveals in opulent quantity of production [in which] a female fussiness over detail can easily pass for the rigour of discipline and there is no need to bother about selection of content since all reverie is important in this hermetically sealed world” (Jason, 1996: 10).

It is worth noting that the critic here does not limit himself to a discussion of Nin’s work, but equates the weaknesses he sees inherent in her writing with her gender and with what he portrays as essentially feminine personality traits. (Similar attacks veiled as literary critique have been launched against Erica Jong’s writing, specifically her novel *Fear of Flying*, as is discussed in section four of this thesis.)

But it also points to a devaluation of the diary as a presumably ‘feminine’ genre. Even Miller, for all his support of and admiration for Nin’s work, exhibits this attitude towards Nin’s use of the diary as her primary literary form: “Throw it away. Write a novel. Better to get on with invention and imagination.” (DuBow, 1994: 68).

It is clear that the notion that the diary, and the ‘journal *intime*’ in particular, is a culturally denigrated sub-genre relegated to the female – written by and for women – is linked to the conventional thought of the time that the novel is the channel for the true literary artist, and by implication the male writer. Even Nin’s psychoanalysts at the time that she professed the Diary to be her primary literary vehicle – particularly Otto Rank – sees Nin’s journal as in conflict with the novel and as a “diffusion of her artistic energy” which she should rather “channel into her fiction” (DuBow, 1994: 123).

This sense that the conventional mode of the realist novel, with its clear, linear representation of plot, character, space and time is a superior literary device, and one used by ‘developed’ male writers is again echoed by Baldanza when he says of Nin’s work:

“There comes a point when the continued flamboyant use of sentence fragments simply must mean that the writer will not be bothered by the effort of putting meaning into mature patterns” (Jason, 1996: 11).

So he censures as ineffective and inadequate Nin’s random impressions in her open-ended narrative, which she uses to depict her disjointed sense of identity but at the same time her struggle towards and her growing sense of self-knowledge.

But Nin sees the diary as a powerful alternative to the traditional – and controlled – literary forms that depict especially women in a limited and limiting fashion and often only allows a rigidly predetermined interpretation.

“I really don’t like the novel anymore. It’s the mythology of woman. It has composites, characters, but today I think we need to know people better than we do in fiction. Part of the novel remains to be interpreted and that’s a hazardous thing. Whereas I don’t think there can be many misunderstandings about the direct expression of the diary. We need that for the moment” (DuBow, 1994: 81)

Susan Edmiston also dismisses the notion that Nin’s diary is a claustrophobic jumble of recurring subject matter when she points out Nin’s deliberate use of imaginative and poetic elements, such as dream and fantasy, to highlight the significance of the hidden, submerged elements of life (DuBow, 1994: 46).

The symbolism of Nin’s dreams, which are interwoven with her interpretations of the emotive impact of her encounters with people integral to her life, not only provides the reader with clues to her inner self but also allows the protagonist to discover “the hidden behind the obvious” (Jason, 1996: 19).

“Dream: Hugh and I are walking in foggy night. Together. I leave him. I enter the house and lie in bed. I am aware that he is seeking me, that he is becoming frantic, that he is running madly in the fog, swimming in it. I am inert. I know I am at home. That he has not thought of looking for me in bed. I lie untouched by his despair. I am at the same time the fog. I am the night around Hugh; my body is lying on the bed. I am space around Hugh. In this space he is running, looking for me” (Nin, 1992b: 22).

Nin dreams about a Hugh looking for an Anaïs who, although physically removed from him, is present in a place that should be familiar to him. But he finds himself in a space that is preventing him from finding her – a space that at the same time is Nin herself. It is clear that the dream depicts and reinforces the difficulty Nin experiences in trying to reconcile her great need to write to the exclusion of all other facets of life and her need to change continuously through her writing, to the restrictions of a marriage that seems to her like “walls which enclose me in which [I am] held tightly, like a big gold nugget”, while in fact she “chooses each day to inhabit one of several souls” (Nin, 1992b: 13).

Indeed, Nin explains this use of fantasy as a further tool to depict her sense of being ‘unfixed’: “My first concept about people around me was that all of them were co-ordinated into a whole, whereas I was made up of a multitude of selves, of fragments”, Nin says, (DuBow, 1994: 47), adding that “the *dédoublement*, the duality, comes at the moment when I watch myself live. It takes the form of a fantasy” (Nin, 1992a: 135).

In contrast to Baldanza, Edmiston sees this incorporation of the symbolic with the direct expression in the Diary as the artist’s ability to embark on two journeys, into the self and into the world, into subjectivity and objectivity. Nin’s diary, she says, “navigates between the real and the imagined even as Anaïs Nin herself navigates between them” (DuBow, 1994: 21).

Furthermore, for Edmiston, Baldanza's observation that Nin's diary functions as a self-absorbed confessional is also flawed. She recognises that Nin does not intend to "unburden herself of material in the Diary as if the material is an impediment to her freedom". Rather, she says, Nin actively uses such material to expand her understanding of the complexities of emotional (and sexual) interactions rather than reject it, and so goes beyond the boundaries of conventional literary patterns.

Edward MacNay expands this analysis when he observes that the continuous interaction between Nin's life and her writing creates a momentum – and so a freedom – of its own:

"As her life forms itself out of her art and she comes to understand art as the personification of her being, Nin creates herself as the human true to the self without guilt" (Jason, 1996: 251).

This is also the point at which Nin intends her female protagonists in the novels – which she called her "study of women" – to arrive. The interlinking of life and Diary is extended to the novels, which clearly emerge from Nin's ongoing investigation of her own conflicted and fragmented self, and contains actual experiences and encounters from her own life (Stuhlmann, 1980: x). Nin herself acknowledged this connection in *Incest* where she says:

"My book and my journal step on each other's feet constantly. I can neither divorce nor reconcile them. I play the traitor to both" (Nin, 1992b: 28).

But critics discard Nin's fictions on the same basis as they do the Diary, observing that the novels are nothing more than "imaginative inventions spun out of a woman obsessed with self-creation" (Kersnowski and Hughes, 1994: 45).

Reviewing Nin's continuous novel *Cities of the Interior*, Baldanza calls the stories "pointless, rambling explorations of erotic entanglements and neurotic fears in bohemian Paris, the Village and Mexico in which many of the same characters recur". He again has trouble with her 'undisciplined' handling of characters and incidents, which he call "so erratic and baffling that one must assume that the writer simply means to spill random impressions onto the page" (Jason, 1996: 10-11).

Another critic picks up on this theme of the absence of order and control in Nin's narratives, but expands it to berate the characters themselves for their 'chaotic' lives. James Grant finds the "failure of discipline in the lives of the characters ubiquitous", but sardonically adds that "to the degree that style ought to mirror the content, Nin's manner is appropriate" (Jason, 1996: 161). And so author and heroine together are damned as one bad woman for being unwilling (or unable) to adhere to the rules of a male-determined literary practice and social conduct – as yet again Erica Jong and her protagonist in *Fear of Flying*, Isadora Duncan, would be reprimanded. (As we will see later, Jong's Isadora is further equated with the author by critics who rebuke the protagonist for being as 'self-conscious', 'subjective' and 'self-involved' as Jong herself.)

Nin, however, once again enters the debate from a very different angle when she explains her novelistic techniques. In the first place, Nin does not attach much value to the use of external events which are strictly spatially and chronologically ordered. She views realism as employing useless “passport information” – often to the exclusion and detriment of the many diverse “emotional interactions and repulsions that occur between character and character” (DuBow, 1994, 58).

For Oliver Evans, reviewing Nin’s fiction in the Fall 1962 edition of *Prairie Schooner*, rather than resulting in meaningless ramblings and incoherent characterisations, this method adds an “extraordinary airiness” to Nin’s fiction, which gives “the impression of being somehow dimensionless, and thus illimitable, unconfined, and unrestrained, and “serenely independent of the conventions of ordinary fiction” (Jason, 1996: 189).

Secondly, Nin makes clear that she tries to avoid the controlled manner in which we normally converse with others to rather express what she calls the “inner monologue” in her fiction. Keith Berwick astutely observes that Nin often uses the term ‘objectivity’ in her fiction, but that this objectivity is really depicted as the “objectivity of intense subjectivity”. He notes that, for Nin, the traditional meaning of the term objectivity is really a form of pseudo-objectivity. This parallels the way in which she regards the conventional treatment of dialogue in the novel as a mere part-representation, which often obscures an individual internal inspection on the external exchange. One arrives at Nin’s understanding of objectivity only when one can “really see through the appearance of things. You can understand people’s feelings” (Nin in DuBow, 55).

Nin eloquently portrays this tension between objectivity and subjectivity – and its ‘gendered’ manifestations – in an exchange between two of the female characters in *Cities of the Interior*:

“‘The first time a boy hurt me,’ said Lillian to Djuna, ‘it was in school. I wept, and he laughed at me. Do you know what I did? I went home and dressed in my brother’s suit. I tried to feel as the boy felt. Naturally as I put on the suit I felt I was putting on a costume of strength. It made me feel sure, as the boy was, confident, impudent. The mere fact of putting my hands in the pockets made me feel arrogant. I thought then that to be a boy meant one did not suffer. Later I felt the same way. I thought man had found a way out of suffering by objectivity.’ But Djuna saw Lillian hidden in her coat of armour, and all her armour lay broken around her, like cruel pieces of mail which had wounded her more than they had protected her from the enemy” (Nin, 1980: 39).

Apart from Nin’s unorthodox treatment of scenario, character and dialogue in her fiction, Tracy Spencer says it is also important to note that she explores themes that few women writers of the time had taken on: love affairs between older women and younger men, single women’s entanglements with married men, women’s friendships with homosexual men, white women’s attraction to black men, a woman’s

attempt to gain erotic self-expression in the absence of love or emotional attachment, father-daughter and brother-sister incest, and lesbianism (Jason, 1996: 56).

According to Nin, these themes portray conflicts that are essentially female – between “maternal love and creation, between romanticism and realism, between emotionalism and rationalism, and between expansion and sacrifice” (DuBow, 1994: 155). An interaction between Lillian and Jay in *Cities of the Interior* displays Nin’s ability to render these conflicts in terms of her protagonists’ relationship, in which one sees the woman subconsciously experiencing a quick succession of changing roles in which she is alternately the one protecting and the one that is vulnerable.

“Jay came towards her almost as a man who limps and whom one instinctively wished to sustain. In a smaller, weaker dimension he seemed to reach the right proportion for his being to enter hers. He entered by the route of her compassion. She opened as a refuge opens, not conscious that it was a man who entered, but a child in need. It was in her frenzy to shelter, cover, defend him that she laid her strength over his head like an enormous starry roof, and the stretching immensity of the boundless mother was substituted for the normal image of the man covering the woman” (Nin, 1980, 48).

As in the Diary, the oblique, indirect expressions of symbol, image and suggestion play a major role in Nin’s fictions, and in both these literary forms, the imagery of motion and immobility is repeatedly employed to represent her female characters’ struggle towards, attainment of or inability to realise emotional and sexual autonomy. Thus women dancing or taking journeys are contrasted to women who are paralysed or unable to leave a particular place. In *Cities of the Interior’s Seduction of the Minotaur*, Lillian, for example, has a recurring dream of a ship that cannot reach the water, “that sailed laboriously, pushed by her with great effort, through city streets” (Nin, 1980: 465).

For Nin, the depictions of immobility signify the entrapment, isolation, fragmentation, suffering, conflict and even self-destruction that the woman experiences in her efforts to reach such a social and sexual identity and individual freedom, defined apart from the man’s identity and his imposition upon her of a man-made expression of female sexuality and the female self. Indeed, Nin uses the sexual act and the manifestation of male sexual release themselves as metaphors for this arrest of the female sexual consciousness (and body).

“She had great difficulty in shifting, separating, in turning away. Her body was filled with retentions, residues, sediments. She awakened unfree, as if laden with the seeds of his being. She felt him a master of this act, free to enter and free to emerge, whereas she felt dispossessed of her identity and freedom” (Nin, 1980: 205).

Spencer underlines the sense that motion in Nin’s work indicates that the self is never fixed but always forming and re-forming itself when she observes that her (female) characters seem to be “animated” not

only through the symbolism of actual journeys but also by experiencing internal expeditions in their “endless absorption and interpretation of sensations, ideas, experiences and dreams” (Jason, 1996: xviii).

Nin further links the symbolism of the voyage with her conviction that the ever-changing portrayal and analysis of the emotional present takes one further than the static retrospection of memory:

“In dreams one perpetuated these journeys in solar barques. And in dreams, too, there were always two: one buried in limestone and unable to float on the waterless routes of anxiety, the other flowing continuously with life. The static one made the voyage of memories, and the floating one proceeded into endless discoveries” (1980: 482-483).

As we have seen earlier, Miller and Nin in their writing are in agreement over the importance of motion, of flow in life. “I love everything that flows,” the Miller persona says in *Tropic of Capricorn* (1961b: 211), and *Tropic of Cancer* ends with:

“So quietly flows the Seine that one hardly notices its presence. It is always there, quiet and unobtrusive like a great artery flowing through the human body. ...The sun is setting. I feel this river flowing through me...” (1961a: 317-318).

But while Miller mainly equates this flow with man’s attainment of ‘perfect liberty’ from the stultification of a social, spiritual and sexual identity the world desires to impose, Nin moves into the less-explored realms of feminine consciousness and female sexuality to depict the limitations imposed on woman’s expression of herself as a sexual and artistic being in her own right.

“A singer was chanting the Mexican plainsong, a lamentation on the woes of passion. The naked feet trampled the dirt, and the bodies lost their identities and flowered into a single dance, moved by one beat. Dr Hernandez frowned and said: ‘Lillian, put your sandals on!’ His tone was protective...But she felt fiercely rebellious at anyone who might put an end to this magnetic connection with others, with the earth, and with the dance, and with the messages of sensuality passing between them” (Nin, 1980: 105-106).

Nin’s sense of motion and arrest of motion in life is ironically reflected in her critics’ disconcertedness over the fluidity of her work. Indeed, they attempt to arrest such motion by alternately berating the author for allowing her fictions to deviate from and so to disrupt the conventional characteristics of the novel, and trying to force her writing into a specific category. In this sense Nin’s fictions have been identified as fitting into the genres of the *roman à clef* and the *roman fleuve*. However, as discussed earlier, Nin is not interested in the structure of the ‘stream novel’, which uses linear development to depict a group’s life and experiences over generations. However, in the sense that the *roman fleuve* depicts a relatedness between the past, present and future it could be compared to Nin’s work, which also exhibits this continuity and connectedness. But Nin’s ‘chain of inner events’ stands in contrast to the realist plot and character development of the *roman fleuve*, and her characters’ emotional sensations

and sexual encounters do not follow a chronological progression as the *roman fleuve* does. Similarly, while the *roman à clef* gives actual events a superficial fictional ‘mask’, but provides a ‘key’ with which such secrets can be ‘unlocked’, Nin makes it very clear that the actual events of her life inform and enhance the understanding of her fictions. Nin herself is the key that unlocks and liberally exhibits her developing knowledge of the self and the emotional life.

Nin’s writing was strongly influenced by a series of movements in the philosophy, art and psychology of her time, and of some of these – like psychoanalysis – she was also a skilled practitioner. Nin acknowledges her debt to surrealism in her use of the movement’s unconscious artistic techniques – dreams, spontaneous writing, automatic writing – but defines her art as having gone further than surrealism by analysing the emotions expressed through such writing. For Nin, surrealism was mainly interested in art as art, whereas she was “as much interested in living as art” (DuBow: 1994: 63).

Nin saw psychoanalysis as a more able vehicle than surrealism to enable the writer to analyse what she called the non-rational self, but avers that such in(tro)spections have been resisted and denied by a masculinist world view:

“Man, with his interest in a logical, rational, controlled world, broke his own link with his own non-rational self...Psychotherapy proved that the non-rational exists in both men and women. Women lived with it. Men denied it” (DuBow, 1994: 184)

Using the image of the forever unknowable, forever unreachable, forever perplexing female – the mermaid – Nin declares that the male’s creating gaze has only managed to form a very precarious, utterly superficial image of woman that fails to capture the depths of her inner being.

“Man created woman to suit his needs. He disposed of her by identifying her with nature and then paraded his contemptuous domination of nature. But woman is not nature alone. She is the mermaid with her fishtail dipped in the unconscious.” (Nin, 1990a: 147).

3.2.2 Sex and the writer: telling the same old story?

I have always admitted the sexual appetite and given it a great place in my work
(Nin, as quoted in DuBow, 1994: 94)

As much as Nin’s work was labelled narcissistic and too personal, her openness about the sexual – and specifically the love affairs of women and between women – has been attacked from many sides. On the one hand her erotic writing was ridiculed as trivial and therefore often ignored; on the other it was met with overwhelming hostility as shocking and repulsive.

Luce Irigaray sees such violent opposition to the telling of woman’s sexuality from a woman’s point of view as an attempt to maintain in literature “the logic of phallic discourse”, which is characterised by “linearity, self-possession, the affirmation of mastery, authority and above all, unity”. But in her view, it

is not enough that feminine discourse makes its sexual voice heard, for this voice can – and often does – simply parallel the erotic writing of the male by using a similar content and form, thereby contributing to keeping this phallic discourse in place. If, Irigaray ventures, feminine discourse does not “struggle to speak otherwise”, it only manages to “reproduce the same story and history” as male discourse (Suleiman, 1985: 22, 23).

This links up to a question Suleiman asks in her essay *(Re)Writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism* and which should be asked of Nin’s erotic writing: are her texts an embodiment of hitherto repressed female eroticism, and can these texts as such be called feminine? (1985: 13).

Nin has remarked that women speak two languages in literature – the male discourse of the dominant culture and the feminine that “only women know or can know as members of the majority subculture” (Jason, 1996: 178). But it seems as if Nin deliberately and self-consciously attempted to assume the ‘second(ary)’ role to develop a feminine identity through her use of form, language and style in her writing. According to Irigaray, such an intentional acquisition of the feminine language changes “a form of subordination into an affirmation” and thus starts to break down the power of the subordinator (Suleiman, 1985: 29).

Millett has a similar argument when she says in *Sexual Politics* that “women, who for centuries had been the objects of male theorising, male desires, male fears and male representations, have to discover and reappropriate themselves as subjects”. She also claims that a “new poetics and a new politics” are needed, “based on women’s reclaiming what had always been theirs but had been usurped from them: control over their bodies and a voice with which to speak about it” (1970: 7).

Nin widely proclaimed her objective to create a feminine aesthetic:

“I believe in communicating by way of the emotions, by imagery, indirectness, the myth. I think all my women have tried to live by the impulses of the subconscious” (DuBow, 1994: 97).

But although Nin pertinently stressed the difference between the male and the female through her writing, she also strove – through her characters’ struggle toward self-development and self-realisation – to lessen the sexual division that is implicit in the sexual difference between male and female.

According to Paul Brians, Nin in her novel *Spy in the House of Love* is aware of and comments on the distorting male gaze that for Millett depersonalises women and ignores their individuality and so widens the chasm between the sexes (Jason, 1996: 127).

“He turned his eyes fully upon her, now a glacial blue; they were impersonal and seemed to gaze beyond her at all women who had dissolved into one, but who might, at any moment, again become dissolved in all. This was the gaze Sabina had always... mistrusted. It was the alchemy of desire fixing itself upon the incarnation of all women into Sabina for a

moment but as easily by a second process able to alchemise Sabina into many others”(Nin, 1980: 383).

Matt Kamboureli goes further when he says that Nin also succeeds in depicting the (male) pornographer in her erotic writing in *Little Birds*. Here he is in agreement with Griffin’s definition of pornography when he observes that one of the manifestations of the pornographer in the lover is he who “worships but at the same time wants to silence the body” (Jason, 1996: 88).

Although Kamboureli says that both erotica and pornography acknowledge the significance of sexuality and aim to arouse sexual feelings, he is of the opinion that they differ in their “aesthetic and socio-cultural perspectives”. So for him Nin’s erotica deals primarily with the “dialectics of desire – desire as the articulation of the tension that exists between a lover’s emotions and the cravings of the body, and desire as the tendency to give aesthetic form to sexual experience”. On the other hand, he says, in her creation of the denigrating male gaze in *Little Birds*, she pointedly shows how the sexual act becomes an end in itself and erotic writing becomes pornography, as it invariably does when the female body and the female self are erased in an orgy of his-point-of-view sex (Jason, 1996: 90).

Kamboureli further strengthens his case that Nin is not merely matching the male sexual discourse in her writing but specifically wants to portray and so contrast the stultifying sexual encounter in which the female is ‘absent’ with her erotica that attempts to portray the female sexual experience, by noting that in the passage from *Little Birds* below, Nin uses a male protagonist to relate the sexual encounter, whereas she generally uses the woman’s voice and the female point of view in her erotic writing.

“He was saying, ‘I like a whore best of all because I feel she will never cling to me, never get entangled with me. It makes me feel free. I do not have to make love to her...This woman’s hair...it was full of life, heavy, and as pungent as if it had been bathed in sperm. Her eyes – it is impossible to describe her eyes except by saying that they were the eyes of an orgasm. With her eyes alone she could give this...absolutely erotic response...Her mouth, not a mouth that made you think of a kiss, or of food, not a mouth to speak with, to form words – no, it was like the mouth of a woman’s sex itself, the shape of it, the way it moved...” (Nin, 1990c: 106-107).

It is striking that this male voice sounds so similar to the Miller persona in his portrayal of women as purely sexual objects in the *Tropics* and *The Rosy Crucifixion*. Nin’s male persona also renders all of woman as cunt so that her whole being becomes immersed in the sexual act as performed by the male, and shapes itself to function wholly as a sexual receptacle of the male sex fantasy.

This links to the observation that has been made that Nin’s erotica is every bit as explicit as Miller’s – as can be seen from the passage below.

“Henry, kiss my eyelashes, put your fingers on my eyelids. Bite my ear. Push back my hair. I have learned to unbutton you so swiftly. All, in my mouth, sucking. Your fingers. The hotness. The frenzy ... The womb sucks, back and forth, open, closed. Lips flicking, snake tongues flicking. Ah, the rupture – a blood cell burst with joy. Dissolution” (Nin, 1990a: 22)

But according to Tracy Spencer, there are obvious differences between her erotic writing and that of Miller in the *Tropics*. Nin’s treatment of erotica is different in that the stories mostly display a woman’s sensibility, “intuitively using a woman’s language, and seeing the sexual experience from a woman’s point of view” (Jason, 1996: 101). This also implies that Nin treats her female sexual characters as subject-matter rather than object-matter – as is generally the case in erotica from the male point of view, and is particularly true of Miller’s sexual writing. So, Nin says of her relationship with June in *Incest*, “We love each other as two women recognising each other’s value” (Nin, 1992b: 42).

At times, however, it does seem as if Nin reverts to a traditionally masculine language to embody what she views as a particularly female conflict and so fails to move away from the ubiquitous male rendering of the female experience, especially in her erotic writing. For example, she appears to describe female sexuality in similar terms to those conventionally employed in male-authored narratives. In the passage below, she equates specific body parts (‘mouth’) with the female sexual being, and uses what one could call ‘gendered’ verbs, such as “yielding”, to describe female sexual reaction.

“If her mouth, body, voice were made for sensuality, its true flow was paralysed in her. Instead of yielding to her eroticism... she throttles it” (Nin, 1990c: 34).

But a closer inspection of the text reveals a subtle undermining of such erotic phallocentricity in that Nin also associates the woman’s voice with her sensuality and the verb “throttles” to describe her internal sexual conflict, which both intend to show active participation in rather than passive acquiescence to the male-female sexual relationship.

Indeed, Nin goes even further in usurping male erotic language by using the verbs “disarm” and “penetrate” in the following excerpt from *Incest*, which describes the intertwined sexual relationships between Henry Miller, his wife June and herself. Nin here subtly indicates her success in gauging what she believes to be June’s essence, her feminine consciousness, whereas Miller as the male is only able to penetrate her body.

“Throughout her love of me there rings this note of jealousy. When she cannot blind me she offers me her body. My only salvation is that I disarm her, I penetrate her almost without words, I dissolve her power merely by staring at her” (1992b: 12)

But consensus still has not been reached on whether Nin succeeded in creating and sustaining a truly female discourse in her writing. In this regard, she has been censured by male and female critics alike –

albeit for very different reasons – for attempting to portray the traditionally male quest for pure sex divorced from love and relationship in female terms.

Nin herself acknowledged that her novel *A Spy in the House of Love* depicts a woman's struggle to liberate herself sexually from connecting sex and love:

“...what she wanted was only the sensual (fusion), to reach man's freedom in adventure, to arrive at enjoyment without dependence which might liberate her from all her anxieties connected with love” (Nin, 1980: 40).

But in trying to achieve “the same thing the man had done, to separate sex and love so she would not be victimised by such emotional entanglements”, both Nin and her female protagonist have been berated by male critics (DuBow, 1994: 147). What they found so offensive was not only the different gaze employed by the female author and the female protagonist to view the sexual, but also the sexual freedom that the woman was attempting to achieve.

Moreover, Nin has been criticised by a number of feminist critics for her depiction of such a separation of the purely sexual act from love. For these critics, Nin's depiction of woman's emancipated experience of the sexual encounter to achieve self-realisation mirrors the man's. So Nin's feminist discourse cannot be seen to be ‘speaking otherwise’ – although it claims the freedom and sexual territory that men were traditionally entitled to, it essentially inhabits the same (sexual) viewpoint. It is felt that there is not much new or liberating present in such a discourse: although the story is told with a female voice, it is still the same story. A similar criticism has been made against Jong's *Fear of Flying*, and it seems justified in both cases.

Also, both in Nin's novel and in *Fear of Flying*, the female protagonist returns to her husband, from whom she fled to adventure and independence and to an experience of (what the male views as) sexual freedom. So there is reason to doubt that she has really freed herself, or found a different, essentially feminine perspective, since she can be seen as only having imitated a male sexual action. And so many feminist critics, such as Rita Felski (1989: 41), are of the opinion that neither Nin nor Jong in these narratives were truly able to portray their female protagonists as having found an authentic female self through their male-delineated sexual experiences.

But Nin has an alternative viewpoint, which links up with her belief that a widening of the difference between male and female is not implicit in the development and identification of a feminine self:

“When I got to America I found myself in a completely masculine culture, but where men were afraid of women. They have declared war on each other. I have won freedom by co-operating with my husbands and lovers... but I never became a female Miller” (DuBow, 1994: 40)

She goes on to say:

“What I don’t like about the feminist movement is that it says it’s *your* fault that I’m not free. That’s not true. I guess women have two jobs – build men’s strength and make them realise that they’re not losing anything at the same time we are building our own” (DuBow, 1994: 40).”

But although there are opposing viewpoints of Nin’s contribution to the development of a female voice in literature, Suleiman is of the opinion that Nin does expand the boundaries imposed on the writing of the sexual woman by introducing a fluidity in her depiction of gender and of sex – especially through her erotic portrayal of her lesbian relationship with June.

She adds that although one finds plenty of lesbian sex in male pornography, it is “always subordinated to a male gaze and above all to male desire” (1985: 10). In *Incest*, Nin writes about her lesbian experiences with June wholly from a woman’s point of view and succeeds in capturing women’s desire for and pleasure in other women.

Suleiman also recognises the existence of what Hélène Cixous calls a “potential bisexuality” in Nin’s writing – “the bisexuality of a dual or even multiple subject, who is not afraid to recognise in him or herself the presence of both sexes, not afraid to open him or herself up to the presence of the other, to the circulation of multiple drives and desires” (1985: 16).

So Nin describes an erotic encounter with June as: “I remember our caress in the taxi last night, my head thrown back to June’s kiss, she so pale, and my hand on her breast” (Nin, 1992b: 10), but later revises it to indicate the changing sexual roles they inhabit:

“June in my arms in the taxi. It is my arm which gets strong; it is her head which is thrown back, it is I who am kissing her throat. June melts like a heavy petal. She looks at me like a child: ‘Anais, see, I am awkward. I feel small in your arms.’ I see her face blurred behind the taxi window as I leave. A tormented, hungry child, desired and unsure of love, frightened, struggling desperately to wield power through mystery and mystifications” (Nin, 1992b: 11).

What is pertinent in Nin’s descriptions of her lovemaking with June is that the roles are never static – the one who has ‘power’ and the one who ‘submits’ are entirely interchangeable:

“We kissed each other passionately. I fitted my body against every curve of June’s body, as if melted into her. She moaned. Her embrace was around me like a multitude of arms; mine was a yieldingness which intoxicated me. I lost myself. I lost my consciousness in this bed of flesh. Our legs were bare and entwined. We rolled and heaved together. I under June, and June under me. Her light moth kisses showered on me, and mine bit her” (Nin, 1992b: 39).

For all Miller's obsession with June in his writing, it is clearly Nin – who employs the voice of the female but one who is open to various sexual experiences and so much less limited in her sexual portrayals than the Miller persona – who describes her the most vividly and most fully in the Diaries.

Nin also notes in the Diary that Miller's conception of June's – and by implication woman's – homosexual desire is inadequate. And she further found fault with his comprehension and depiction of the heterosexual woman in his writing:

“Henry has a monstrous conception of June's lesbianism. The physical, and limited, quality of what he imagined; the sucking and gestures like those of fucking. He discovers through my journals that without the sucking or gestures there exists a suspended world of sensations without necessarily factual culmination, which is more mysterious and deep than what he supposed existed between June and Jean, and June and me” (Nin, 1992b: 49).

It is evident that Nin's understanding and portrayal of woman as a sexual being surpasses and overturns the conventional sexual narrative and so is able to escape the narrow, restricted and distorted writing of gender.

But Miller's ambivalence towards June that comes out so strongly in his work, and his inability to capture her true personality other than in caricature, are also to a degree evident in Nin's Diaries. Nin describes how she alternates between extricating herself from June's power and being weaker than June, and so veers from one evaluation to another, and from sympathy to remoteness.

“Henry came to Louveciennes with June. As June walked toward me from the darkness of the garden into the light of the door, I saw for the first time the most beautiful woman on earth. A startlingly white face, burning dark eyes, a face so alive I felt it would consume itself before my eyes... She is bizarre, fantastic, nervous, like someone in a high fever. Her beauty drowned me. As I sat before her, I felt I would do anything she asked of me. Henry suddenly faded. She was colour and brilliance and strangeness” (Nin, 1992b: 72).

“By the end of the evening I had extricated myself from her power. She killed my admiration by her talk. The enormous ego, false, weak, posturing. She lacks the courage of her personality, which is sensual, heavy with experience. Her role alone occupies her. She invents dramas in which she always stars. I am sure she creates genuine dramas, genuine chaos and whirlpools of feelings, but I feel that her share in it is a pose...She is an actress every moment. I cannot grasp the core of June... By the end of the evening I... felt fascinated with her face and body which promises so much, but hating her invented self which hides the true one” (Nin, 1992b: 79).

Erica Jong finds another ‘new story’ that Nin's feminist discourse introduces in her portrayal of her sexual relationship with her father. For Jong, what is remarkable about Nin's telling of this sexual

relationship is not only the candid description of physical incest but the “willingness to record all her feelings about it, even before she fully understands them” (1998: 109).

“‘Let me kiss your mouth.’ He put his arms around me. I hesitated. I was tortured by a complexity of feeling, wanting his mouth, yet afraid, feeling I was to kiss a brother, yet tempted – terrified and desirous. We kissed, and that kiss unleashed a wave of desire. More terror than joy. The joy of something unnameable, obscure. He so beautiful – godlike and womanlike, seductive and chiselled, hard and soft” (Nin, 1992b: 209).

Nin attempts to render both the female and the male sexual and emotional experience of incest real and truthful, and deftly manages to capture the deep anxiety as well as the unmentionable ecstasy of the liaison – and so succeeds in “establishing contact with a great many ways of looking at things which the male author had never done” (DuBow, 1994: 104).

“Father is so timid when he arrives that he walks from the gate to the door reading, and then launches into discourses like June’s, covering his uneasiness. Slowly and gradually I make him feel at ease by my calm. And gently he begins to make love to me. I feel mildly amorous. Gay. Indifferent. He is a very expert and delightful lover. But I realise that he is dazed by the shock of realities, uneasy and alarmed. (Nin, 1992b: 287).

But Nin also conveys to the reader the culmination of the complex ambivalence towards her father that she expresses throughout the Diary, and so reveals a self that still is fragmented, that still struggles towards a wholeness of identity that must be established separate from and beyond the association with the father, the lover or the husband.

“I see myself victimising my Father because he victimised me. But I love him with the thousand divinatory eyes I want to be loved with. It is the disease of love, not the fruit. It is when one’s self has become so masked to the world, one’s language so unintelligible, one’s loneliness so consuming that only one’s Double can penetrate one” (Nin, 1992b: 322).

With her frank portrayal of the sexual encounter between father and daughter, Nin successfully challenged a sexual taboo that is so strong that most writers – men and women – mythicise and disguise these feelings, Jong notes (1998: 110):

“We loved each other as no two people ever loved each other. Yet we continue to be lovers, but the kind of lovers who wait for each other forever” (Nin, 1992b: 344).

If one agrees with Foucault’s view that “the task of truth is linked to the challenging of taboos” (1990: 130), one can even say that through her writing of the ultimate taboo, Nin courageously persists in her pursuit of perfect freedom from guilt, convention and prescribed sexual roles, and that her Diary becomes the ‘first’ book written by the ‘first’ woman alive – just as Miller saw the breaking down of so many taboos in *Tropic of Cancer* render that the ‘last’ book written by the ‘last’ man alive.

3.2.3 Literary liaisons: the writing of the other

About both June and Henry, I have been more human, more comprehending, more true; and perhaps, I may in the end be more artistic.

(Nin, 1992b: 30)

Through their initial friendship on the basis of each having found a kindred writer spirit, their later sexual relationship and through their continuous critique and promotion of each other's work, the lives of Nin and Miller were intertwined on various levels. This can also be seen from the frequency with which critics have compared their writing. George Wickes observes that while Miller made the best of both worlds in this writing by using the "improvisation, imagination, madness and chaos of the dadaists and surrealists", he remained "anchored in reality". Nin, on the other hand, he says, never seemed able to be able to escape from her introspection (Gottesman, 1992: 123). This criticism of introspection has repeatedly been lodged against Nin. According to Couteau, Miller had a "historically superior grasp" of the issues at hand, as well as a "more imaginative ability to creatively respond to them", whereas Nin deliberately skirted around the wider social and political issues that did not have a direct bearing on her intensely personal narrative (1988: 4). Thus many of the critics, such as Wickes and Couteau, who put Nin's and Miller's writing side by side seem to conclude that Nin exhibits much less skill as she merely 'transcribed' female experience (Gottesman, 1992: 124; Couteau 1988: 5).

But although Miller should be seen as a literary innovator, he never experimented with gender or allowed the feminine voice to speak in his novels. Indeed, Miller's novels depict women from a perspective of limited insight. In contrast, Sharon Spencer notes, Nin developed and deliberately used a discourse that privileged mental and linguistic characteristics often denigrated as feminine, and so "anticipated the contemporary French feminists' call for a writing the female body" (Jason, 1996: 56). And thus Nin is seen to have advanced a valorisation of the feminine rather than a move towards androgyny or "becoming man, or like man", neither of which she saw as an option in the liberation of the female voice in literature (Gottesman 1992: 2).

Like Miller, Nin suffered from a problematic parental relationship in that her father abandoned the family when she was still a child. And as in Miller's fiction, this troubled relationship figures prominently in Nin's writing of the sexual, as discussed earlier. But according to Jong, Nin's sexuality was much freer than Miller's.

"[She] admits that she is...desperate to seduce and abandon men, to wreak her revenge on a father who abandoned her. Henry was far more at home, whatever his reputation, with serial monogamy in the American fashion. (And) for all his fictional boasting of his sexual exploits, his... partners appear to have been casual, sometimes paid, while (Nin) was deeply involved with a variety of men, including her husband and her two psychiatrists, René Allende and Otto Rank. She was also...incestuously involved with her own father.

Nowhere before...has a woman written so candidly of breaking the final oedipal taboo”
(1993: 98-99).

At the same time, however, Jong sees Nin as “more enslaved to men than most [women]”. Estelle Jelinek agrees, pointing out that Nin’s heroes and mentors in her diaries are always men – Henry Miller, D.H. Lawrence, Otto Rank, René Allende, Antonin Artaud (Jason, 1996:46). And although the female protagonists in her novels search for an individual identity, they frequently search for such identity through men.

A very perceptive parallel has been drawn between Nin’s Diary and Miller’s books. Gunther Stuhlmann in *A Literate Passion: Letters of Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller*, says “much of Miller’s published work – discursive, anecdotal, self-referential, self-revelatory and enlivened by some boyish bragging – resembles a gargantuan letter tossed at the world, like Nin’s gigantic letter to a lost father” (1987: xviii). But these letters – which reflect their authors’ never-ending pursuit of freedom and a sense of the self apart from that which the world imposes – by implication then also remain “open-ended, unfinished, to be continued”, and ever-inviting of discussion, analysis and interpretation (1987: xvii).

Nin and censorship: inflicted or controlled?

So Anaïs is performing, yes, the art of presence, but the feeling is there intact.

(Nin, as quoted in DuBow, 1994: x)

Nin’s writing was never subjected to the rigours of official censorship as Miller’s was – mainly because her life’s records (the unexpurgated Diary) were first published so much later than his fiction. However, one can almost say that Nin performed censorship on her own material – first since she often rewrote and reassembled parts of her Diary and secondly in refusing to have the unexpurgated Diary published until a number of people described in it had died. But a more insidious form of censorship has also been practised against Nin in that her work has been largely ignored as written in forms – the Diary and the ‘continuous’, ‘unstructured’ novels – that do not justify serious academic analysis and literary criticism.

It is ironic then that Nin, who before 1966 (when she published the first of her edited diaries) struggled to have her fictions accepted by commercial publishers and enjoyed no widespread literary recognition, between this time and 1972 became what DuBow calls “undoubtedly one of the most frequently interviewed of twentieth-century authors” (1994: xi). No doubt the intimate nature of Nin’s expurgated Diary – which always promised more ‘secrets’ to be revealed – played a significant role in the creation of Nin as a sought-after literary and media persona.

The sense of immediacy created by the numerous interviews with Nin naturally mirrored the “live, unedited” nature of her Diary. But in her public appearances Nin continued what she herself called an intense self-monitoring, which started with her writing (and retrospective rewriting) of the Diary. Therefore, as Nin the writer to a degree exercised control over the first person, private genre of the Diary

where impressions were ostensibly set down in the white heat of the emotions, so her media identity was also carefully managed and regulated. Indeed, one must agree with DuBow when she says that as Nin “transformed her life into art through the diary’s publication” she also “transformed her person into art in her numerous physical appearances in her interviews” (1994: xiii).

But again, even with the apparently renewed interest in the interpretation and value of Nin’s literary art, her work still seems censored, concealed even though available, in that Nin the celebrity attracts more attention than Nin the writer. As Nin herself ruefully observed:

“Everyone wants me to lecture. Everyone wants to see me. When I tell them it’s all in [my] work, they do not accept that. They want to see me in the flesh” (DuBow, 1994: 177).

4 ERICA JONG (1942-)

4.1 The environment and the writer

My suitcase was full of guidebooks...and ten copies of my first book of poems. Some of these were to be given to a literary agent in London. Others were simply carried out of insecurity; badges of identity to put on for anyone I might meet. They were designed to prove that I was not just an ordinary woman.

(Jong, 1974: 245)

Erica Jong's most influential novel, *Fear of Flying*, enjoyed widespread critical acclaim and elicited vicious disapproval even before its publication in 1973. Its massive and almost immediate commercial success at a time which simultaneously saw the emergence of a new important social and cultural movement – the feminist movement – and an increasingly pervasive and influential popular media led to an immense mediasation and sexualisation of Jong as the female autobiographical writer who bared all.

These opposing viewpoints expressed about Jong's work were – ironically – almost perfectly encapsulated by two of the most talked-about erotic writers of forty years earlier. So, while Henry Miller praised Jong's novel as putting forth “great sagas of sex and love” written from the female point of view, Anaïs Nin slated her writing as producing “a great deal of destructiveness in terms of the depiction of the male/female relationship” (DuBow, 1994: 231).

For Charlotte Templin, *Fear of Flying's* combination of “comedy, explicit sex and feminist rhetoric ignited anxieties smouldering beneath the surface of middle-class, white American culture” (1995: 29). So both the diatribes and endorsements probably revealed more about the critics than the text, coming at a cultural moment that was dominated by major changes – specifically in the social behaviour of women but also in readers who assumed new subject positions as the focus in literature increasingly came to shift from solely paying attention to the literary work as object and onto the reader as an actively participating subject, who is seen to constitute rather than passively consume the text.

But this also meant that the female writer who coined the term the “zipless fuck” – supposed to be “absolutely pure... and free of ulterior motives” (1974: 22) – was to be met head-on with the 1970s notion of the personal is political. The kind of free love-ideal expounded by the female protagonist of Jong's novel was clearly personal but therefore political, and suddenly it was under pressure from both ‘traditional’ and ‘feminist’ reviewers – and thus “no longer so free” (Marlowe, 2003: 3). Consequently, as Miller in later years attempted to categorise his sexual writing as not always appropriate in the face of daunting pressure from the feminist movement and Nin tried to declare her position on female writing as an attempt to reach the individual woman in contrast to the very collectivist feminism of the time, Jong in the late 1980s withdrew, at least partly, from what was viewed as an explicit stance on the heterosexual (female) libertine. So in the article *Ziplash: A Sexual Libertine Recants*, written for *Ms*

magazine, Jong moves to a do-not-shoot-the-messenger position by stating: “I never *advocated* the zipless fuck. I merely *chronicled* it” (Kirkus, 1993: 8).

For Templin, the fact that Jong has come to be represented as a media image greatly influenced her literary reputation, but also led to her writing being mainly identified with popular art, and, by implication, low culture (1995:53). And so critics mostly viewed the numerous sexual exploits and marital alliances of *Fear of Flying*'s heroine, Isadora Wing, who leaves a conference of 117 psychoanalysts – of which at least six have treated and a seventh has married her (Jong, 1974: 11) – to travel through Europe with her (psychoanalyst) lover, as the memoirs of a mediocre novelist pandering to a mediocre audience of, on the one hand, middle-class men consumed by fear of the sexually forward female and on the other, middle-class women suddenly weaving their every sexual fantasy around Isadora's adventures.

Having associated Jong with what today would be called ‘chiklit’, a number of reviewers were moreover incensed by what they saw as Jong's literary pretentiousness, exemplified by extensive literary quotations, epigraphs and allusions scattered throughout *Fear of Flying* and by her discussions in the novel of the role of the artist. Clearly, Templin says, these critics are annoyed at the “co-optation of the literary heritage by one not qualified to be among its inheritors” (1995: 38). This view goes hand in hand with another opinion often voiced about Jong's writing – that these devices Jong employs are inappropriate in novels that deal with sexuality and the body, especially when it is done by a woman and in a humorous fashion.

In addition, the flamboyant, sexually explicit media persona into which Jong and her female protagonist were ineluctably fused, came to be viewed as being equally opportunistic commercially as she was sexually. In a review of *Fear of Flying* entitled *The Writer as Sexual Show-Off: Or, Making Press Agents Unnecessary* – evidently meant to ‘show up’ Jong after she had written *The Writer as Sexual Guru* – Alfred Kazin lumps Jong with contemporary (American) writers who use the sexual confessional mode as a vehicle for self-promotion. And as was the case with Nin, Jong is cast off as part of that peculiar but shallow group made up of women novelists with “as commonplace a mind as ever appeared on the best-seller lists” (1975: 38). But while Nin and her female characters were combined into the ‘undisciplined’ and ‘immature’ woman, Kazin goes even further to suggest that Jong's female readers also form part of this category when he comments that she “obviously speaks for all the oppressed women in this country” (1975:39).

4.2 Jong's work

4.2.1 Media product versus the novel: contemporary literature's most successful solipsist?

Can it be good literature if it's funny, sexy, and written by a woman?

(Templin, 1995: 2)

While Miller's and Nin's lives, for their readers and their critics, were unavoidably entwined with their autobiographical writing, Erica Jong's writing – and by implication her life – was moulded into a media product almost from the start of her literary career. This has made it difficult to approach her work except through complex layers of image, reputation and stereotype.

According to Templin, what is most illuminating about the formation of Jong's literary reputation is that, given the tremendous variety of opinions aired, her writing was subjected to a constantly shifting process of evaluation. This, of course, in turn starts to raise questions about the nature of literary value itself, who is able and 'authorised' to reach a definitive judgment of a literary work and by what process such a position is achieved (1995: 18). One cannot overlook the fact that specific cultural and political agendas (for example, feminism) had a strong impact on reviews of Jong's writing, as did the popular media, which created its own, albeit simplified, commodified and sensationalist images. This of course also meant that the traditional notion of literary value as an inherent property of the text became suspect since the critical community (evaluators and readers) itself has become so divided and so diverse. Thus, with *Fear of Flying*, the influence on the interpretation of Jong's writing of the experiential, ideological, institutional and cultural space inhabited by reviewers and readers became particularly pronounced, and evidently politicised the 'personal' sexual subject.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith further clarifies this observation when she says that the value of the literary text is "the product of the dynamics of an economic system: specifically, the personal economy constituted by the subject's needs, interests, and resources – biological, psychological, material and experiential" (1998: 30-31). The personal economy that Jong's female protagonist propounds is one of the body, more specifically the female sexual body, as seen, examined and constructed (or deconstructed) by the female gaze that is directed upon it and the female voice that speaks it.

"I stood back to examine my body. Where did my body end and the air around it begin? Somewhere... I had read that at time of stress – or ecstasy – we lose the boundaries of our bodies. We forget we own them. It was a sensation I often had... I tried to examine my physical self, to take stock so I could remember who I was – if indeed my body could be said to be me" (Jong, 1974: 257).

The extent of the response to and the judgment of the very 'physical' or sexual content of *Fear of Flying*, but also of Jong herself, clearly suggest ambivalence about what could be said openly in the

novel and who could say it. But it also means that the political has become personal, because, as the sexual writer and the sexual persona created become equated, so one can see the “public and private selves of the reviewer become indivisible” in the evaluation of the novel’s (sexual) content (Templin, 1995: 20). Clearly some of the issues that *Fear of Flying* raises – female sexual pleasure and freedom and the candid language years previously available only to the male writer to express it – very personally implicate both reader and critic as these are so intimately related to their identities, social roles and political struggles.

In *How to Suppress Women’s Writing*, Joanna Russ suggests that the sense of repulsion, or alternatively scorn, which (mostly) male critics have employed to review Jong’s erotic writing is just another manifestation of the attempt to deny female agency. Devaluing this agency by promoting the idea that “women make themselves ridiculous by creating art”, or that their “display of the body” through its writing is immodest, endeavours to show women up as “abnormal, neurotic, unpleasant, offensive and hence unlovable” (1983: 25). So, specifically focusing on the sexual exploits of Jong’s female protagonist to the exclusion of what has come to be seen as her ability to satirise contemporary manners and mores, critics have been able to reject Jong’s style as merely superficial, her language simply obscene and the ideas expounded as trivial or trite. This is evident in Kazin’s observation that “Isadora’s self-display and claims of victimisation and self-pity are vulgar and manipulative” (1975: 38).

Moreover, as in the case of Nin’s writing, Jong’s novel is also accused of having no shape and of simply being a jumble of the thinly veiled sexual confessions of the author, which do not convey any real development of either character or plot. For Ellen Hope Meyer, the “only real fiction” in *Fear of Flying* is the “publisher’s disclaimer that any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental” (1974: 21). Her criticism becomes even more reminiscent of that made against Nin when she notes that Jong’s novel belongs to a ‘Dear Diary’ genre which creates a solipsistic world in which the “self-indulgent subjectivity” of the heroine thwarts any true development of the self:

“The genre’s narrow focus makes liberation unattainable. It expresses the author’s indisposition to get out of the prison of herself. There is no artistic distance between the author and her subject, and hence no objectivity” (1975: 57).

Whereas neither Miller nor Nin truly acquired widespread popular recognition in terms of the sale of their books, Jong almost immediately topped the best-seller lists upon the publication of *Fear of Flying*. However, Templin observes that as the sheer extent of the novel’s sales led some critics to think of her work as ‘popular culture’ rather than ‘literature’ – as if “mass appeal somehow disqualified a novel from being taken seriously” – they also accused her of deliberately manufacturing a product rather than creating art to attract a wider audience (1995: 84). So a woman choosing to write about sex was simultaneously maligned as being unable to produce high art, being a financial gain-seeker and unable to produce anything more than an easily-understood narrative that depicts a shallow view of life, which

would appeal solely to a readership that preferred to indulge in “fantasies of fulfilment rather than contemplate painful realities” (1995: 85-86).

Ironically, the opinion that the female writer who candidly explores the female body and the female sexual identity must be rebuked for having no decency or reticence – either about her own or others’ ‘private lives’ – seems to dog male novelists much less frequently when they make use of autobiographical material. In fact, the novelist William Maxwell in an interview in 1994 used the examples of Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow and Henry Miller to illustrate that “contemporary American fiction is often confessional in nature, and self-consciously and unapologetically so” (1994: 26).

As was seen earlier in the criticism of Nin’s work, Maxwell also ascribes the difference between ‘successful’ autobiographical writing – by implication, that created by the male writer – and superficial reminiscence to the fact that the first is characterised by a restrained quality of production which leads to an ordered progression of narrative that for him fashions the work of art, whereas the second is simply a random and so undisciplined selection of experiences:

“The true confessional novel has a shape, a controlled effect, a satisfying conclusion and a story, which distinguishes it from formless accumulation, which merely becomes an exercise in remembering” (1994: 27).

Even that portion of the male establishment that seemed to admit Jong, Templin says, in the end undid her literary value. She uses as example the fact that *Playboy* magazine requested an interview with her to examine her erotic writing in *Fear of Flying* – which has come to be accepted as quite a tribute to the (male) writer – but then uses the headline ‘Erica Jong Bares Her Mind’ (1995: 187). This brings us back to the problem initially discussed: the refusal to admit the cultural authority of the female writer who dares to diverge from the mainstream – even if it is composed of what is seen as the “immoral majority” (Weaver, 2002: 11) that inhabits the world of pornography.

But for all the disparaging appraisals of her writing, it is undeniable that Jong’s *Fear of Flying* became an important document of at least the early women’s movement and played a vital role in awakening the sexual consciousness of women. Templin says Jong’s feminist confession in the first place offered women the opportunity to acknowledge openly that their sexual fantasies and desires were real and legitimate (1995: 64).

Molly Haskell concurs when she says:

“The big lie perpetrated on western society is the idea of women’s inferiority, a lie so deeply ingrained in our social behaviour that merely to recognise it is to risk unravelling the entire fabric of our civilisation” (1973: 11).

Fear of Flying pertinently echoes this viewpoint when Isadora Wing observes:

“When a man says no, it’s no. When a woman says no, it’s yes, or at least maybe. And little by little, women begin to believe in this view of themselves. Finally, after centuries of living under the shadow of such assumptions, they no longer know what they want and can never make up their minds about anything. And men, of course, compounds the problem by mocking them for their indecisiveness and blaming it on biology, hormones, pre-menstrual tension” (Jong, 1974: 248).

This passage reveals another important concept of the early feminist movement – that most problems women of this period struggled with were collective rather than personal, and so provided the “cathartic release which accompanies speaking about” and identifying as natural and socially relevant that which has been “kept hidden and silent” (Haskell, 1973: 13).

In the third place, Jong’s frank treatment of the female sexual experience assisted in forming women’s political consciousness by making available an important means of self-exploration and social criticism. In this sense it is interesting that feminist reviewers focused on various elements of Jong’s writing – and more frequently commented on Isadora’s aspiration to be a writer than on her sexual exploits.

For several reasons, however, Jong has become less influential amongst, and even favoured by, present-day (American) feminists. While the early women’s movement was concerned with helping women to achieve a voice – an endeavour in which Jong’s novel certainly played a significant role – contemporary feminists view themselves more as social activists who want to look at and influence a wider range of social issues, and so attain greater freedom for women by articulating a reclaimed female voice in a multiplicity of ways. For example, Templin says, race and class have become important foci in contemporary American feminism – an agenda that Jong’s novel did not privilege (1995: 178).

Another reason Templin offers is the fact that feminism has evolved into a more radical theory of separatism than what Jong promoted. *Fear of Flying* purposely attempted to break down some of the social taboos around the active expression and agency of the heterosexual woman. However, feminism has come to be seen as providing more of a special identification with those things that are distinctly feminine, and drawing much more pointedly an association between feminism and lesbianism. (1995: 133).

In addition, Templin says, becoming a media product has worked against Jong’s canonisation as a feminist intellectual by “specularising and sexualising her rather than endowing her with an authoritative subjectivity” (1995: 73). She explains this viewpoint by observing that, although feminist ideas and ideals have been reported in a positive light in the media, they have just as often been caricatured and distorted. The coverage of Jong the erotic writer and Jong the (assumed) over-sexed female is a good example of such stereotyping. Moreover, as we saw earlier that the public was more interested in simplifying the erotic writer Nin by wanting to see a celebrity in the flesh than in analysing the

complexities of her writing, the media's tendency to simplify and distort watered down the complex issues of a sexist culture that Jong attempted to satirise and thus reveal.

“Growing up female in America. What a liability! What litanies the advertisers of the good life chanted at you! What curious catechisms! Love your hair. That shine on your face should come from him, not from your skin. How to score with every male in the zodiac” (Jong, 1974: 141).

And so Isadora Wing's shrewd insight into how gender roles are constructed in contemporary society and by the media is almost completely overlooked in the struggle to analyse Jong the sexual icon. The endless investigation into Jong's flamboyant behaviour and sexual attractiveness clearly measures value according to glamorous appearance rather than intellectual value. For Jong, it seems, it was impossible to develop as an American writer, to be successfully 'literary' without being sexy first.

4.2.2 Sex and the writer: meaningless opposition?

I only wanted to give you something to write about [Adrian Goodlove to Isadora Wing on their affair].
(Jong, 1974: 244)

Fear of Flying's Isadora Wing embarked on her quest for sexual identity and female distinctiveness at a time when almost “every aspect of a woman's identity was contested and up for grabs” (Templin, 1995: 147). In her attempt to mark out the female self and so break the rules of a male-centred society, Jong met with great opposition.

In the first place, 'talking dirty' in print was at this stage still very much a male prerogative. And so, although the male writer could (often) claim it as a literary technique that attempted to displace, reorientate and modify a stagnating social, political and sexual society – and therefore desire itself – a similar practice was not available to the female writer. For example, critics Kazin and Paul Theroux both called Jong's novel “hopelessly vulgar”, whereas Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, which was published four years earlier and candidly described a man's sexual fascinations, was praised as a breaking of literary ground (Kazin 1975: 38; Theroux 1974:24).

Templin says it is a demonstration of the gendered nature of responses to sexually explicit material that such writing on the part of a woman generally arouses great anger. Indeed, critics have repeatedly used Jong's sexual content against her in ways that seem to attempt to out-mention her unmentionable language, so that Theroux says further in his review:

“Erica Jong's witless heroine looms like a mammoth pudenda, as roomy as the Carlsbad caverns, luring amorous spelunkers to confusion in her plunging grottoes” (1974: 24).

Kazin appears to be employing the same method to silence the woman again by relegating her to the position of sexual object when he responds to John Updike's favourable review of *Fear of Flying* by sneeringly noting:

“Updike's enjoyment of the novel is some kind of subliminal sexual pleasure: it is not clear from [his] excitement whether he was reviewing Jong or tasting her” (1975: 39).

But it was not simply Jong's use of 'obscene' language in *Fear of Flying* that shocked and outraged critics; the fact that she allowed her female protagonist to consider sexual freedom and to talk boldly and defiantly about female sexual gratification or the lack of it and women's bodies was seen as a threat to the role in which society had traditionally cast women. The sex object in literature, Templin says, which was given a voice, was starting to talk back defiantly and adventurously – not only calling attention to her own social, sexual, political and economic body but also looking at and assessing that of the male (1995: 199).

“It didn't matter, you see, whether you had an IQ of 170 or and IQ of 70, you were brainwashed all the same. Only the surface trappings were different. Only the talk was a little more sophisticated. Underneath you longed to be... filled up by a giant prick spouting sperm, soapsuds, silks and satins, and of course, money... [you] imagined how you would screw every man in the room, [you] fucked total strangers on a train with your eyes” (Jong, 1974: 18).

By (re)presenting the previously silent, unrecognised, disembodied female, Jong ventures to reassess and transform traditional cultural forms and social institutions, to alter the meaning of the female body as determined by male 'authority', to challenge masculine sexual norms and above all to establish an autonomous female self. So we come to see that the notion of self-invention, which for a long time has been seen as the territory of the male writer and the male fictional persona – particularly embodied by the Henry Miller persona – is appropriated by the woman writer and her female characters, who are, moreover, starting to make demands on men towards restitution of the space they have usurped from and delimited for them. According to Suleiman, Jong's use of frank sexual language in *Fear of Flying* – recognised as a 'first' in American fiction by a woman – “was a self-conscious reversal of stereotypes and an attempt to parody the language of the tough-guy narrator hero of, for example, Henry Miller” (1985: 9).

Indeed, Isadora seems to be mirroring the Miller persona's fascination with his (fictionally) aggrandised sexual powers when she observes:

“For the true, ultimate zipless, A-1 fuck, it was necessary that you never get to know the man very well... So another condition for the zipless fuck was brevity. And anonymity made it even better” (Jong, 1974: 23).

Suleiman goes even further when she notes that Isadora's seeming obsession with the fantasy of the zipless fuck so "directly mirrors the male fantasies that have objectified women throughout literary history", that it is impossible to miss Jong's "satirical thrust" which invites the reader to join her in turning the tables on the conventional male-female relationship and let women "treat men as men have always treated women" (1985, 23).

So what is involved here, Suleiman makes clear, is a reversal not only of who may and may not use a specific language but also of who inhabits certain roles so that the "always silent, objectified woman of male pornographic fiction suddenly usurps both the pornographer's language and his way of looking at the opposite sex"(1985:10). Ironically, even Jong's publisher echoed the traditional male notion that the female writer was only permitted certain forms of speech by trying to ban the term from her novel by arguing it was ungrammatical.

But this does not mean that Jong's heroine always talks from a position of confidence. Isadora is conflicted, fearing flying (and therefore the freedom of independence) at the same time as she desires it. And so we see her travelling back and forth in time in her mind while travelling through Europe with her psychoanalytic lover, Adrian Goodlove, continuously questioning and re-evaluating her life to "try to remember who I am" – and so also struggling towards the development of the separate female entity that had not yet been achieved (Jong, 1974: 156).

By using the comic mode, however, Jong manages to render this confusion objectively real rather than subjectively phobic and self-pitying.

"There were 117 psychoanalysts on the Pan Am flight to Vienna and I'd been treated by six of them. And married a seventh. God knows it was a tribute to the shrinks' ineptitude or my own glorious unanalyzability that I was now, if anything, more scared of flying than when I began my analytical adventures some thirteen years ago" (Jong, 1974: 11).

Moreover, the humorous look at the despised body of the female serves to both intensify the reader's focus on her and disconcert the confident male gaze, which up to now has constituted the female body.

"I floated lightly in the deep tub, feeling that something was different, something was strange, but I couldn't figure out just what it was. I looked down at my body. The pink V of my thighs, the triangle of curly hair, the Tampax string fishing the water like a Hemingway hero, the white belly, the breasts half floating... A nice body. Mine. I decided to keep it" (Jong, 1974: 276).

But Suleiman also recognises that, although Jong's candid sexual narrative is important as a first step, the mere "usurpation of old narrative structures and old words by new speakers" cannot be enough to wholly break down "old habits of thought and old ways of seeing". Only by inventing "new structures,

new words, a new syntax will the rigidly delineated male/female sexual and societal roles be transformed” (1985: 12).

This raises the question also asked of Nin’s erotic writing – whether Jong ever attempts to define her woman character away from a (dominant) male sexual partner. Although *Fear of Flying* was supposed to be a celebration of female sexual autonomy and the freedom to choose the sexual experience, many feminist critics were troubled by what they saw as the female protagonist’s “ultimate affirmation of patriarchal standards of female conduct” – which is particularly concretely portrayed by her returning to her husband and her marriage at the end of the novel (Templin, 1995: 111).

Rita Felski has a slightly alternative view when she says that the heroine does not by implication return to the role a male society seeks to see her play by returning to her husband – on the one hand since she is unsure of her further actions and on the other because she has come to develop at least some sort of recognition of her female self.

“Perhaps I had only come to take a bath. Perhaps I would leave before Bennett returned. Or perhaps we’d go home together and work things out. Or perhaps we’d go home together and separate. It was not clear how it would end. But I know my fear was missing. Maybe not for good. But it was gone. And whatever happened, I knew I would survive. Surviving meant being born over and over” (Jong, 1974: 277).

So Felski says:

“The journey, which began in the air of uncertainty – with the heroine’s fear of flying a metaphor for women’s alternate longing for and fear of independence – ends in the muddy bathwater of self-acceptance” (1989: 14).

In contrast, although Felski sees Jong’s writing as attempting to “sustain the refusal of the values of a male-dominated society”, she does not consider her capable of maintaining it in the further portrayal of Isadora’s sexual relations in the novel, which represent the male sexual companion as almost always necessary to ‘save’ the female, to make her whole (1989: 27)

“It was only after he’d left that I was able to gather my terror in my two hands and possess it. We did not part enemies... As soon as I ceased expecting rescue from him, I began concentrating on how to endure being alone... I had options. All I had to do was to endure the insane pounding of my heart until I could find Bennett again – or someone” (Jong, 1974: 245).

Templin seems to expand Felski’s argument when she notes that although Jong’s novel is valuable in the sense that it expresses “all the contradictions about sex and love which women have to live through”, it fails because the female protagonist is seen to “capitulate to an individual solution of rather than an alternative to phallogentric romantic love” (1995: 161).

While some critics condemned Jong's novel as being too transgressive, others found it not transgressive enough. Indeed, Templin says, female-initiated sex, which through Jong's and other feminists' writing became a symbol of sexual and social freedom during the early phase of women's liberation, would later be construed as a delusion that "trapped women in their bodies" in the same fashion as they were earlier trapped in the body composed by the male gaze on and writing of it (1995: 169). Contemporary feminists thus criticise Jong for falsifying women's reality by promoting an essentially masculinist sexual fantasy as that of the female.

Jong defends her position by averring that the 'zipless fuck' is not an echo of the power game of the phallogentric heterosexual relationship. On the contrary, she says – and here she echoes Nin who maintained that masculinist sexual power does not have to be broken down for the woman to be able to build her sexual sovereignty – the man is not taking and the woman is not giving (1993: 15).

"The zipless fuck is more than a fuck. It is a platonic ideal. Zipless because when you came together zippers fell away like rose petals, underwear blew off in one breath like dandelion fluff. Tongues intertwined and turned liquid. Your whole soul flowed out through your tongue and into the mouth of your lover, and his into yours" (Jong, 1974: 87).

Ironically, Templin says, like the psychoanalysis of which Jong is so incisively critical in *Fear of Flying*, she essentially takes up the position of "adaptation and internal freedom" in terms of the male-female relationship – again a stance Nin also supported – rather than taking up the separatism of the radical feminists (1995: 124).

Sally Tisdale seems to argue along the same lines when she submits that sexual activity is always a form of sublimation of our sexuality into a manageable identity:

"It is only a part of, a version as it were, of sexuality, which is so complex, so omnivorous, so perverse, so huge, so unwieldy, so uncivilised that to act it out in any particular given way is necessarily incomplete" (1995: 243).

Yet one must agree with Felski that a preoccupation with sexuality is not in itself progressive, and that sexual liberation should not be equated with the freedom to act and talk like a man (1989: 117). Moreover, the liberation of the female libido in Jong's writing cannot fully constitute the liberation of the female self, in a similar fashion as the sexual freedom constituted in the Miller persona could not wholly rid Miller of a limited sexual ideology.

But it is clear that Jong, at least to some extent, realises the trap of what Templin calls the "ubiquitous love plot that has tyrannised every heroine in literature – the dream of total fulfilment through a man" (1995: 71).

"What all the ads and all the whoreoscopes seemed to imply was that if only you were narcissistic *enough*, if only you took proper care of your smells, your hair, your boobs, your

eyelashes, your armpits, your crotch, your stars, your scars – you would meet a beautiful, powerful, potent and rich man who would satisfy every longing, fill every hole, make your heart skip a beat (or stand still), and make you misty, and fly you to the moon (preferably on gossamer wings), where you would live totally satisfied forever” (Jong, 1974: 63).

But for some feminists who find any promotion of heterosexual sex ‘politically incorrect’, Jong’s *Isadora* is completely conventional in this regard and so Jong only manages to repeat the same ‘old story’ of female fulfilment through sexual relations with men. This recalls the viewpoint that Jong is unable to deal comprehensively with the relationships between women in her writing because she is so preoccupied with the conventional male-female relationship (Templin, 1995: 124). And so once again Jong’s identification with sexuality and sexual politics have worked against her as the feminist movement began to focus more on the alternative narrative of women “caring about each other, in their lives and in their work, than on their caring, or not caring, about men” (Templin, 1995: 125).

In addition, Jong has been largely discarded by feminists who find her classified as a “fellow pioneer in the construction of the sexually explicit literature” of male writers Miller and Updike – a literature that they have outrightly critiqued as sexist and antifeminist (Felski, 1989: 27). Miller credited Jong with liberating women writers in the same way as he liberated men writers to write freely about sex and the body (Jong, 1993: 248). It is exactly this stance that has made feminists uncomfortable – it seems as if the male has given permission to the woman writer to ‘liberate’ the female, but that the only way to achieve such freedom is to imitate man’s sexual pattern or inhabit his sexual space.

Despite the varied criticism of Jong’s attempt to write an alternative narrative of the female body, reviewers do see such a new story in her physical journey – which, like the male epic, also endeavours to portray the inner growth and development of the protagonist. What is interesting, Templin notes, is that *Isadora*’s journey coincides with the biological rhythms of her 28-day menstrual cycle. Templin says the body Jong therefore so openly writes into her text is thus “much more than a body that seeks and receives sexual gratification; it is a body that experiences ovulation, menstrual bleeding, tension, release”, a body that tells a tale absent from American literature until this time (1995: 41).

“I seem to be involved with all the changes of my body. They never pass unnoticed. I seem to know exactly when I ovulate. In the second week of the cycle, I feel a tiny ping and then a sort of tingling ache in my lower belly. A few days later I’ll often find a tiny spot of blood in the rubber yarmulke of the diaphragm. A bright red smear, the only visible trace of the egg that might have become a baby. I feel a wave of sadness then which is almost indescribable... What I really wanted was to give birth to myself” (Jong, 1974: 214).

4.2.3 Jong and censorship: a mass-culture reputation confronts literary value

It was interesting what the censor had thought to censor.

(Jong, 1974: 66)

In her memoir-biography *Erica Jong on Henry Miller: The Devil at Large*, Jong seems not only to encapsulate the kind of censorship imposed on the “dissenting artist” Miller through the silencing of his art, “first by close-minded puritans and then by open-minded feminists pursuing honesty and gender-fairness”, but also to draw such censorship through to the critical strictures imposed upon her writing (1993: 13). She takes this argument even further when she says that, similarly, the brand of feminism that wants to “reimpose controls on pornography in the name of protecting women [is] anything but open-minded” – and in fact is a censor of literature (1993, 24).

But as we saw Templin observe earlier, Jong’s immense mediatation has also contributed to a certain kind of censorship of her writing by contributing to a powerful critical community’s relegation of the writer’s work to the category of mass culture because it placed “little value on the body, the sexual woman, or a comedy of sexuality” in Jong’s *Fear of Flying* (1995: 167). Moreover, it also seems as if the media and traditional literary institutions further ‘censored’ Jong’s sexual writing and her public persona by attempting to control how they were consumed and thus constituted by the reader.

It is interesting to note how frequently mass culture has been identified with the feminine. Andreas Huyssen writes of the late nineteenth century:

“The fear of the masses in this age of declining liberalism is always a fear of woman, a fear of nature out of control, a fear of the unconscious, of female sexuality, of the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in the mass”. (1986: 52)

According to him, mass culture – persistently gendered as feminine and therefore inferior – is “the other of a powerfully superior masculine modernism informed by deeply patriarchal structures” (1986: 53-54).

Censorship for Jong, therefore, manifested itself in the form of the continuously changing way in which the reader, the reviewer and the feminist movement evaluated and reacted to her writing.

5 EROTIC LITERATURE: A CONTEMPORARY AND FUTURE VIEW

What is peculiar to modern societies... is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speak of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret
(Michel Foucault, 1990: 35).

In this time of an overwhelmingly popular culture and popular literature, the conflicts and challenges that occupied Jong's sexual writing are seen to strike readers as preposterously dated. Suleiman underscores this when she notes that although *Fear of Flying* was a significant book in 1973 – “stylistically and in terms of feminist politics” – its commentaries today “sound merely like clichés” (1985, 44).

The winds of social, political, economic and cultural change where the sexual is concerned have clearly also blown across Nin's erotic writing. Jong astutely observes:

“Nin is out of fashion as a contemporary feminist, because... she is a seductress in a time when all seduction is presumed to be rape, a sensitive chronicler of inner emotion and psychoanalytic transformation when all that is wanted from women writers is angry agitprop which repudiates Freud and all dead white males” (1998: 113).

Even the writing of the former grand guru of sex in American literature – Henry Miller – no longer seems particularly steamy or controversial today when sexual explicitness has lost much of its shock value. But the paradox inherent here is that, although such shock value has mostly been removed from the erotic writing of the authors discussed in this thesis, we still differentiate between pornography and erotica according to such values as whether it is graphic and brutally frank, or ‘tasteful’. This is evident in a review of Catherine Breillat's film *Romance* by Shaun de Waal in which he says that pornography is “brazen, single-minded, utilitarian”, whereas erotica “slides into the public gaze disguised by glamour and sentiment” (2000: 17). This viewpoint clearly links up with the prevalence of (sexual) guilt in a society that is largely ambivalent about the manifestation of the sexual.

Foucault does not see this sexual guilt as a manifestation of sexual repression. And so he pertinently avoids the question ‘Why are we repressed?’ to rather ask why “we say with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed” and that we silence sex when in fact we endlessly speak it (Foucault, 1990: 9). This could partly be explained by a manifestation of the contemporary knowledge society's desire for information, so that even our (sexual) pleasure can only be experienced once we have delineated it as data – or what Foucault calls “a pleasure that comes from knowing pleasure” (1990: 98).

In addition, it is important to note how an increasingly “me-orientated culture and society” – endlessly portrayed and exploited by the media – has forever altered the contemporary view of the sexual

(Scalmer, 2003: 3). According to Ann Marlowe, today we mainly distinguish the genders socially (and sexually) by what they buy – which implies that eroticism has fled from the bedroom to the store:

“And now that the patriarchy’s gone, or at least imagined to be gone, everything isn’t pleasure, as we imagined, but business” (2003: 6).

5.1 The metrosexual: inviting both the male and female (commercial) gaze?

This view that the erotic in contemporary society is very much tied up in the sexual value the commercial gaze allocates, is perfectly encapsulated in the emergence of the male metrosexual – whom Mark Simpson defines as a “narcissist as much in love with himself as with his urban lifestyle” (2002: 4). Sexual orientation for the metrosexual has become largely irrelevant, as he has clearly “taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference” (Simpson, 2002: 6). It is evident that the attempt to attain a separate sexual identity propounded by Nin and Jong has largely been replaced by the need for certainty about image – which seems to say that our sense of the sexual self has ineluctably been drawn back into being constituted by being looked at. As Simpson observes, “that’s the only way you can be certain you actually exist” (2002: 7).

Paradoxically, whereas the male metrosexual has retreated into a passive formation of his sexual being since the sexual self is almost purely formed through external images projected by the style press onto a blank but receptive and desiring screen, the female metrosexual – depicted by media images such as the female characters of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) – is becoming increasingly active. Simpson says because the heterosexual male’s sense of self is no longer delivered by his interaction with women, it is instead being challenged by the female who is increasingly becoming assertive in the public space (2002: 11).

In addition, the preoccupation of popular culture – and of course the metrosexual – with the inescapable effects of ageing has left a further indelible mark on how men and women view sexuality. For Soumya Bhattacharya, Michel Houellebecq in his novel *Atomised* powerfully captures this moment in the sexual existence of a society obsessed with youth and the ways in which it strives to harness its present affluence to attain (or maintain) it:

“Sexual desire is preoccupied with youth, and the tendency to regard ever-younger girls as fair game was simply a return to the true nature of desire, comparable to the return of stock prices to their true value after a run on the exchange” (2001: 15).

5.2 The girl sub-culture: assuming or throwing off the male gaze?

But a further force is gaining sexual power in popular culture – today’s female action heroes and ‘chick’ celebrities. In reviewing *Girl Heroes – The New Force in Popular Culture*, Susan Lumby investigates the rise of post-modern female action heroes and discusses why their super-human destiny is so readily being embraced by popular literature and popular culture. To her it is clear that the “girls-can-do-anything movement” has taken over a set of primarily ‘masculine’ values – aggressiveness, control and buying power (2003: 5). For Lumby, girl power is an important moment in our cultural history, since young women are finally succeeding in overcoming their pervasive ‘passive victim’ status:

“The new girl hero doesn’t need a man to define her – she has staked her own claim to the privileges of both femininity and masculinity” (2003:7).

But the contemporary feminist movement disagrees. Girl culture, it argues, is just a cynical commercial exercise of the contemporary media vehicle and popular literature in repackaging female sex appeal – and so once again commodify and objectify the female, albeit by putting a different slant on society’s obsession with female images and female beauty (Scalmer, 2003: 9).

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